

GOD, MAN, & EPIC POETRY

VOLUME II  
MEDIEVAL

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GOD, MAN, & EPIC POETRY  
A STUDY  
IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

BY

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VOLUME II  
MEDIEVAL



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## PREFACE TO VOLUME TWO

THE author's purpose and personal feelings have already received some attention in the introductory chapter and preface to volume i. So it is enough to say that volume ii contains a study of almost the same tendencies working themselves out under different influences and with different materials. I had no inkling of this continuity when I began to study epic poetry; the conclusions have gradually come to me as a result of the comparative method. It was not till I had studied Dante afresh that I saw, or thought that I saw, the significance of Homer. The compilation of this second volume has been far more laborious than that of the first. For one reason it was impossible to adhere to chronological sequence. After discussing *Saxo Grammaticus* I have gone back to discuss Charlemagne; after the coming of the friars, I have reviewed the Dionysiac mysteries; after the *Nibelungenlied* I have turned to Boethius. Such reversals are perplexing, but they could not be avoided. Civilisation is like a river fed by many tributaries, which spring from different sources in widely distant regions. Where life is complex we cannot expect its commentaries to be artificially simple. In fact my chief fear is that chap. ii on northern religious sentiment, and chaps. ix and x on the inception and conquest of Original Sin, will appear more systematised than the facts warrant. It can only be urged in justification that, though much has necessarily been taken for granted, the tendencies seem to have moved in the directions which I indicate. I devoutly hope that they may not prove to be quite so difficult to read as they were to write. The book is also complicated by the overwhelming preponderance

of continental literature. The phenomena discussed are all essential to the development of English prose and poetry, and yet no single feature can be fully understood without reference to French, Italian or Latin models. It is not so much a matter of "influences" as of seeing the thing in its entirety, as it really is. Thus, although I have used English illustrations for preference, I find that my pages are full of quotations from foreign books. I have nearly always retained the original language, not out of pedantry, but because there was some individuality or significance in the phrasing which could not be reproduced in a translation. The quotation is generally introduced into the text in such a way as to leave no doubt about its meaning.

It is pleasant to conclude this Preface in a more cheerful mood than that dominating the preface to volume I. Besides thanking Miss Winifred Husbands for her valuable service in compiling the index and revising the proofs, I should like to put on record my gratitude to the Bedford College Research and Publications Fund for their generous encouragement

H. V. R.

WYLDENWAYS  
HAMPSTEAD  
*August 1926*

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## CHAPTER I

### *BEOWULF*

**I**N the previous volume we have formed some idea of the Homeric character of the warriors as portrayed by the poets. We have seen that unlike the personalities of other forms of literature, they were called to a life of strenuous action and rivalry, in which the power to conquer was the chief if not the only virtue, but that the warriors themselves are not interesting because of what they achieved in the battlefield. They are interesting rather for the spirit which this life called forth, for enthusiasm and the capacity for admiration, for a disposition to appreciate the good things of this world and to realise tenfold all that death or disaster deprived them of. Above all, their epic qualities display themselves in the power to acquire and preserve their self-confidence and pride of race. They not only can dismiss all the humiliations to which men are exposed in the pursuit of war, they can defy the ghostly enemies and superstitious fears which they had inherited from less strenuous and self-sufficient generations. So the epics of Homer are part of the epic of the human race. They record one of man's early efforts in moral and spiritual progress, in winning peace of mind while carrying war into his neighbour's territory. As such, they should have a peculiarly stimulating and reassuring effect on the modern reader. One of the most besetting weaknesses of civilised man—unnoticed by most moralists—is the inevitable tendency to let our vision be narrowed by the vastness of our experiences. Our mental horizon is becoming so large that we have not time or ability to see more of it than concerns our own difficulties and failures. After reading Homer, life may seem more arduous, but it becomes less complicated. This is especially true in an age like our own, when culture generally seems to be associated with twice-breathed air, the circumscribed limits of a study or a reading-room, and the sagging viscera which result from a sedentary occupation. But the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* told each of one

stage only in the pilgrimage of the human spirit and then we saw how the thoughts of men turned to more purely intellectual problems. Were there no further steps made in the paths of heroic action by other races? Can we not find a second narrative poem, sufficiently akin to Homer in spirit to be called an epic, but one which makes a fresh advance into the realms of sentiment and imagination?

i. *Beowulf the product of a race which had undergone more intellectual experiences and advanced further in material civilisation, than is the case in Homeric culture.*

Such an advance will be found in *Beowulf*. Its general resemblances to Homer have been ably established<sup>1</sup>. It is enough to remind the reader that the Old English epic shows a similar delight in the trappings of civilisation; a similar pride in royal blood; a similar trust in Fate; a similar interest in the ordinary details and proceedings of life, such as feasts, or the arrival of a ship; a similar touch of exaggeration, for just as Achilles shouted like ten thousand men, so Beowulf swam for five days carrying thirty suits of armour. Lastly the Anglo-Saxon lords, or their poets, enjoyed a more than Homeric confidence in the possible grandeur and completeness of man. They believed that a human being might become sufficiently great to overcome magic and monsters ten times more formidable than himself.

So we may conclude that *Beowulf*, as an epic, is true to type. For that very reason it is more instructive to notice in what essential respects it differs from the *Iliad*. By this means, we may get some glimpse into the continuity, persistence and progress of human effort. In the first place it should be noticed that the poem shows signs of having been composed at a time when men's minds were more complex and cultivated than they were when the *Iliad* took its present form. It has even been suggested that the poet of *Beowulf* enjoyed the advantage of having read the *Aeneid* or perhaps the *Odyssey*. Such influences are very difficult to establish. If this early poet knew Homer or Vergil we should expect him to introduce the

<sup>1</sup> Chadwick, *Heroic Age*, chap. xv.

type of monologue at which they excelled, and we should not expect him to be completely ignorant of classical teratology. The reader has only to peruse the treatise on monsters composed by a Christian of perhaps the sixth century<sup>1</sup> and preserved in the tenth-century ms. of *Phaedrus*, to realise that our poet was incapable of or indifferent to the kind of Greek and Roman imagery most likely to be known to his age. And yet the English poem shows unmistakeable maturity in its habits of thought and methods of expression. Whatever the history of its composition, it belongs to a time when the age was well advanced in civilisation.

A well-known characteristic of Anglo-Saxon poetry will make this contention clear. We have already<sup>2</sup> seen how wonderfully the *Iliad* has been embellished by similes, and how this literary figure was, in its origin, a sign of extreme antiquity, probably a device for intensifying and amplifying a too slender vocabulary, and perhaps also a distant recollection of animism. In *Beowulf*, you will look in vain for such descriptive digressions. In their place you will find an abundance of "tokens" or "kennings."

"Kennings," in their earliest form, are probably far older than the Homeric similes or the Minoan entaglios<sup>3</sup>. Primitive men refused to give certain things their direct name, either to avoid attracting their attention, or to protect them from exposure to the power of witchcraft. Thus in some parts of the world a seal is still called "the bald beast," a mouse "the leg-runner," a bear "the pride of the thicket," a knife "the arrow for bleeding cattle," a dog "the hairy one."<sup>3</sup> The observance of such taboos must surely have arisen in some pre-Heroic Age. But human beings would have to go through many later experiences before they used periphrases of this kind to intensify speech or stimulate the imagination. Let us consider how these early taboos are developed in English and Icelandic poetry.

<sup>1</sup> *De Monstris et de Belluis* is the title given to the work in *Traditions Thératologiques*, par J. Berger de Xivrey, 1836.

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. II, § 3.

<sup>3</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, pt II, *Taboo and the Perils of the Soul*, chap. VI, § 6.

Apart from the many classifications of "kennings" already made from other points of view, it may be said that there are two kinds. One type is of the nature of a simile, as when the sun is called "the world's great candle," a sword is "the light of battle," to make a speech is "to unlock a word-hoard," fire is "the branches' foe," the eyes are "the head jewels," arrows are "battle adders," or to die is "to leave the joys of earth." We may claim that periphrases of this type serve the same purpose as the Homeric simile; they illustrate and intensify. In fact some closely resemble the Homeric personal epithet as when Tyr is periphrased as the "one-handed god," Bragi as the "long-bearded god," Ulr as "god of the snow-shoe."<sup>1</sup> Yet even when considering this class, it cannot be overlooked that the majority of examples are more condensed and more allusive, and so resemble the metaphors and periphrases which begin to appear in Hesiod and reach their full development in the Greek drama. Thus instead of the *Iliad*'s famous comparison of missiles to a snowstorm<sup>2</sup>, we have the familiar "battle sleet" of northern poetry. The other kind of "kenning," which appears to have grown up with the pictorial type, seems at first to be more fanciful, but otherwise the same. Yet this class is ~~more~~ more; it is mystifying. What is "the rapture of heaven," "the relic of files," "the weaver of peace," "the brother of the wind," "the name of the field," "the steed of Gunn," "the lord that scatters Ocean's fire," "halo of the helm," "the blood-snake," "the weaver of dreams"? It is one thing to describe the ice as "a floor fashioned by the frost," but another thing to describe it as "the bark of the river" or "the roof of the wave." The reader may take exception to this or that example, but as regards the class he will conclude that unless one happened, even in Anglo-Saxon times, to be familiar with these allusions, we should have to stop and guess. That is to say, they contain the spirit of riddles. They have that quality of "surprise" and of "deception" to which Aristotle<sup>3</sup> alludes when comparing metaphors with enigmas. In the *Skáldskaparmál* they are recognised as such. Bragi explains how metaphors are *hidden* in secret terms and

<sup>1</sup> *Skáldsk.* ix, x, xiv.

<sup>2</sup> *Il.* xii, 277-89.

<sup>3</sup> *Rhet.* iii, 11.

Aegir agrees that this is indeed *poetry*, which for that reason is called “the liquid of the dwarves.” Sometimes their explanation of a “kenning” sounds exactly like the answer to a riddle. For instance<sup>1</sup>, gold is called the fire of the hand or of the leg because it is red; silver is snow or ice or hoar-frost because it is white; and who could be expected to know off-hand that “the forge foaming with song” is the poet’s head? We find that the taste for these periphrases was growing up at a time when educated men found in riddling a serious outlet for their intellectual activity. At the end of the sixth century Gregory was indulging in this exercise, when he punned on *angli*, *Deiri*, *Alleluia*<sup>2</sup>. A century and a half later, Alcuin showed how the art leads to subtlety of thought and expression in *Disputatio reguli et nobilissimi juvenis Peppini cum Albino scholastico*. Later still we find that Air must enjoy these mental gymnastics after his encounter with Grettir<sup>3</sup>. We have already noticed similar features in Greek literature. The fragment of Hesiod, quoted by Gregory of Corinth, might even have been composed under the direction of Bragi—

δὴ τόθ’ ὅτ’ ἔξ ὕλης τὴν μητέρα μητρὸς ἄγοντο  
αὐαλένη τε καὶ ὀπταλένη σφετέροισι τέκεσσι<sup>4</sup>.

We have also noticed that the phenomenon arose in a post-Homeric stage of civilisation<sup>5</sup>, when men were seeking expression for the complexity of life. The quest was involving what Wackernagel has called *die Versinnlichung des Geistigen die Vergnügung des Sinnlichen*<sup>6</sup>. We saw, too, that between the age of Hesiod and Herodotus, the art developed into stories. We find a similar, though not identical development in Norse literature. When Thor, accompanied by Loki and Thjálf, reaches Utgartha-loki, each, as behoves an adventurer into an enchanted kingdom, has to put his accomplishments to the

<sup>1</sup> *Skáldsk.* XLV.

<sup>2</sup> Bede, *Hist. Eccl.* II, 1. See also R. W. Chambers, *England Before the Norman Conquest*, Longmans, 1926, p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> *Grettissaga*, LIV.

<sup>4</sup> *Rhett. Gr.* VII, 776. Who is the mother of a mother? In this case Wood (for frequency of “mother-daughter” motif in different ages and countries see F. Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, Rid. 34, note). How can she be slain by her own children? When burnt in the flames.

<sup>5</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. VI, § 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Haupts. Zs.* III, 25.

test. Yet Loki, who boasts of his powers of eating, is beaten by Logi. Thjálfí is surpassed in fleetness of foot by Hugi. Thor finds that he cannot prevail against Eli, Utgartha-loki's nurse. What wonder? Logi is fire, Hugi is thought, and Eli is old age<sup>1</sup>. In spirit and intellectual appeal this combination of *Rätselmärchen*, *Wettkampf*, and "cosmic riddle" is like an oracle story. Early medieval literature did not, of course, develop to any great extent an interest in oracles in the Herodotean sense, though the Icelandic sagas are full of enigmatical dreams, which tax human wisdom to the utmost<sup>2</sup>. But none-the-less, their interest in riddles, whether *Rätselmärchen*, *énigme de mots* or *énigme de choses*, developed with the development of their civilisation. It is not only the early "kennings" that "often read like riddles."<sup>3</sup> We cannot with any certainty fix the date of Symphosius, but we know that his ablest imitators and exponents in this country—Aldhelm, Tatwine, Eusebius, Boniface and the poet or poets of the riddles in *The Exeter Book*—do not appear before the eighth century, when Old English civilisation had reached its last and highest phase, and when *Beowulf* had in all probability assumed its present form. That poem has no riddles, but its audience must have cultivated the riddling habit. Some of its "kennings" are simple, but others complex, and all exemplify different stages of the same habit of thought; what Montesquieu, in a quite different connection, described as *connaître la ressemblance des choses diverses et la différence des choses semblables*. It is difficult to believe that these suggestive paraphrases and allusions would have been incorporated in the verses, unless men had ceased to be satisfied with the admiration of sheer strength (which admiration inspires some of the best Homeric similes) and were now interested in abstractions.

But the presence of "kennings" is only one piece of evidence. There are other signs to prove that, quite apart from questions of style, the Old English epic is the product of an age later and more civilised than that of Homer. There is, of course, nothing significant in the fact that the one composition followed

<sup>1</sup> *Gylf.* XLVI, XLVII.

<sup>2</sup> *Post*, chap. II, § 6.

<sup>3</sup> F. B. Gummere, *Beginnings of Poetry*, N.Y. 1901.

the other two at a distance of about fifteen centuries. The contemporaries of Perikles were probably more modern than the subjects of Queen Elisabeth. But no careful reader of the poems under comparison can deny that *Beowulf* portrays a more cultured and complex (if similar) state of society, than does the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. To revert to Darwin's<sup>1</sup> test of progress, the tools which the Danes or Geats use are more developed. Helmets are reinforced by bronze in the shape of a boar, probably the symbol of the god Freyr, chased with gold, instead of the socket and horse-hair crest of the Homeric warrior. The "Benty Grange" helmet had a coating of horn plates fixed to an iron framework with silver-headed rivets, and was besides almost certainly fitted with cheek pieces and a nose guard. Their swords, often damascened with a ring pattern, were far more efficient weapons than the brand which Achilles half drew in his quarrel with Agamemnon<sup>2</sup>. In metal work the skill of the northern heroes must at least have challenged comparison with the cunning of the Pelasgians or Acheans. Besides, the companions of Beowulf were now beginning to wear shirts of ring armour down to their knees instead of the plates of bronze or tin or hide which covered the Acheans. The many references in Saxo and in the sagas to enchanted coats probably arose from the toughness of these defences<sup>3</sup>. Above all the Danes and Anglo-Saxons had made great strides in the management of horses. Caesar<sup>4</sup> recorded his admiration for the courage and skill of the British charioteers. But in those early pre-Roman days, as with the Homeric Acheans, there was no cavalry. By the time that *Beowulf* was composed, the Danes and Geats had learnt to produce a breed of animals that was big and strong enough to be ridden, and the atherlings were proud of their skill in horsemanship<sup>5</sup>. Nor need we be disturbed by Stjerna's and J. R. Clark Hall's<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Descent of Man*, chap. III.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the fine description of a sword in *Helgakvitha Hjorvarthssonar*, ix, and the innumerable allusions in Icelandic sagas.

<sup>3</sup> *Post*, chap. II, § 6.

<sup>4</sup> *B.G.* IV, 24.

<sup>5</sup> ll. 853, 864, 916.

<sup>6</sup> *Essays on questions connected with the Old English Poem of Beowulf*. Translated edition, Viking Club, Coventry.

contention that the grave finds of Vendel are richer in objects of arts and culture than are the English tombs so far discovered before the eighth century, as we know that in any case there was an interchange of civilisation between England and the continent. Besides, Beowulf is spoken of as *gold-wlanc* and the typical thegn in *Finnsburg* is *gold-hladen*. In one respect the Germanic peoples lagged far behind the Pelasgians: they had a horror or at least a distrust of masonry. We know that after the Saxon conquest, Chester, Silchester and other Roman sites stood utterly deserted, and that there were practically no towns in England till Alfred and his sister Aethelfloed and their successors walled and fortified more than thirty *boroughs*. Most probably so many dwellings were destroyed or abandoned, because the new possessors feared the haunting spirits of the former occupants. When King Aedilberctus of Kent met St Augustin at Thanet, he would not hold a conference with him unless it were in the open. He still clung to the old superstition<sup>1</sup> that if he entered a house he would render himself vulnerable to any magic which the missionary might be able to exercise. So a king's or a chief's palace was not much more than a long wooden hall, roughly stockaded. Though Hrothgar possibly built Roskilde as a market place for his merchants and though he placed Heorot as the centre of a royal village, the outward sign of his supremacy, and named it Heorot because it overtopped its peers as does a stag; yet it was built on a timber framework clamped with iron. Nothing proves more convincingly the vigour of the epic spirit and the sense of civilisation, than that even with these materials the Danes could build, or the poet could imagine, a structure worthy to compare with any hall in Priam's palace. The interior was adorned with stately columns, their broad gables decorated with antlers; its roof gleamed with bronze and gold; its walls were hung with golden tapestry<sup>2</sup> and contrasted with the paved and variegated floor<sup>3</sup>. One thinks of Jarmunrik, the royal hall of the *Östgotländske* empire<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> "Ueterus usus augurio," *Baedae* 1, 25.

<sup>2</sup> l. 995.

<sup>3</sup> l. 725.

<sup>4</sup> Axel Olrik, *Danmarks Hæteditning*, vol. 1, chap. 1, § 8. (Transl. L. M. Hollander, *Scandinavian Monographs*, vol. IV.)

So there can be no doubt that the civilisation represented in *Beowulf* surpassed that of the Homeric Acheans in the arts and crafts of life. How could it be otherwise? When, towards the end of the fourth century, Athanaric the Goth was invited by Theodosius to enter Constantinople, he could hardly believe that the master of so much wealth and splendour was a mere mortal<sup>1</sup>. A few years later forty thousand of his compatriots were maintained in the Eastern Empire, under the title of *Foederati*, and distinguished by gold collars. Alaric himself learnt the art of war in the school of Theodosius<sup>2</sup>. From that time onwards Roman gold poured into the north, first as pay to mercenaries then as ransom to escape invasion up till the sixth century, and from that time onwards the barbarians had gradually ransacked every centre of classical wealth and culture except Constantinople. We have now to notice that the northern standards of conduct and ideals of heroism were also more advanced.

## II. *The civilisation of the beer hall.*

Strange as it may at first sound, Hrothgar's beer hall was the centre of what was best and most ennobling in men's lives. It has often been pointed out that in epic poetry the mention of beer suggests revelry and the spirit of fellowship—the Germanic *dréam*—which accompanied feasting, but we are still rather too familiar with Christian or classical standards easily to realise how this conviviality initiated and fostered early Teutonic civilisation. It was in these beer halls that a pagan hero conceived his highest ideals and learnt to control his worst passions. As is well known, the conversation often turned on the trials and duties which lay before them, and it became a custom, almost an institution, for warriors to make definite profession of the feats which they intended to accomplish. No doubt there were occasions, especially in later times, when such announcements became idle vaunts, like those recorded in *Jomsvikinga Saga* or the boasts which Harald Bluetooth made Toke fulfil, and deserved to be met not with the help of Christ but with the demand of King Hugon that

<sup>1</sup> *Jornandes*, xviii.

<sup>2</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, chap. xxvii.

such idle pretensions should be put to immediate proof<sup>1</sup>. But it is also true that warriors, in this atmosphere, rose above their natural selves and willed deeds of heroism which, without this impulse, would have been beyond their reach. Beowulf himself begins his adventure with a declaration of what he intends to perform. It was the thought of his promise to his king, when they sat at their mead, which nerved Wiglaf to follow Beowulf into the tomb where the dragon lurked<sup>2</sup>. At the battle of Maldon Aelfwine reminds his comrades of their boasts at the beer feasts. When Hiartwar treacherously attacked Hrothgar at night, Hialti encouraged Biarki by reminding him of all the sacred vows and gallant promises which *poti temulento prompsimus ore*<sup>3</sup>. It seems to have been this spirit of rivalry and imaginative enthusiasm which gave that unmistakeable touch of devotion to the services of the *comitatus* or *gesiths*<sup>4</sup>. When Rolf the king of Denmark was slain by the invading Goths, we are told that his fall had such an effect on his followers that *omnibus appetende mortis cupiditatem ingeneraret, eique morte iungi vita iocundius duceretur*<sup>5</sup>. But surely the most convincing testimony is that given unconsciously by the northerners' enemies, who no longer themselves understood the institution, but all the same bore witness to the heroism of Brennus's "own company, the tallest and most stalwart of them all."<sup>6</sup> The *comitatus* is supposed to have existed among the Homeric Acheans, but we do not hear anything of their especial gallantry. It seems to have been the boasts of the beer hall which gave this glamour to the disasters of the battlefield. It may not be too much to suspect that these *béots* played the same rôle in their civilisation as poetry does in ours. Were they not, in fact, a kind of poetry; an anticipation of the real as one would like it to be; an idealisation of coming events? Just as we sometimes come across a dirge which

<sup>1</sup> *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*.      <sup>2</sup> ll. 2633 ff.      <sup>3</sup> *Saxo*, II, xviii<sup>b</sup>, p. 94.

<sup>4</sup> This celebrated institution, familiar to all students of Anglo-Saxon, is explained by Chadwick, *Heroic Age*, chaps. xvi and xix. For other examples of fidelity and heroism of *comitatus*, see Olrik, *op. cit.* chap. III, § 2; Traill, *Social England*, vol. I, chap. II, p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> *Saxo*, II, xxii<sup>a</sup>, p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> *Paus.* x, xxiii, 4 (the attack on Delphi, after a night spent in the utmost danger and hardship).

puts into a few words the outline of an epic<sup>1</sup>, so these aspirations and promises, even if never realised, may have become the basis of ballads or lays. This suggestion cannot be proved, but is it not likely that some *guma gilphloedin, gidda gemyndig*<sup>2</sup> put into the story of a real achievement the idealism and enthusiasm which had fired the boasts of the carousers? After all, the Greek poets compared the taunts with which youths provoked each other at feasts to the snatches which Hermes sang to his newly made lyre<sup>3</sup>.

In the beer hall warriors must also have learnt the gentler arts of life. When England was being converted, the Bible story was put into verse and the first thoughts on Christianity may have come to many in such a hall as Heorot. It was in the beer hall too that warriors came to cultivate the strength which is expressed in gentleness. We are told that banqueters used to listen spell-bound to tales of war and adventure as early as the time of Priscus's visit to Attila in A.D. 448<sup>4</sup>, but this rapt attention is no sign of self-control. With men of strong animal passions, it is generally the reverse side of excitability. In fact the Byzantine historian declares *διηγεί-ρουντο τοῖς φρουρίμασιν*. We may well believe it. One of their post-prandial sports<sup>5</sup> in later centuries was to throw gnawed bones at each other's heads, catch them and return them with interest; nor were men of violence above using such missiles with more murderous intent, when in their cups. Saxo tells how at Agnor's banquet the warriors pelted Hialti with *nodosa ossa*<sup>6</sup>, and Archbishop Aelfeah met his death in the same way<sup>7</sup>. According to Layamon<sup>8</sup>, Arthur's knights disagreed on a point of protocol, so they started to throw loaves of bread at each other, then flung the silver cups, then flew at each other with their fists, and ended by drawing their swords. So the feasts of northern warriors must at all times

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Achilles by corpse of Patroklos, *Il.* xxiii, 12 ff. His words recapitulate some of the most striking scenes in the previous books.

<sup>2</sup> See ll. 867–75.

<sup>3</sup> *Hymn to Hermes*, l. 54.

<sup>4</sup> K. Müller, *Fragmента Historicorum Graec.* iv, p. 92. Cf. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, chap. xxxiv.

<sup>5</sup> A. Olrik, *op. cit.* chap. iv, § 1.

<sup>6</sup> II, xvii<sup>a</sup>, p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> *A.S. Chronicle*, anno 1012.

<sup>8</sup> Ed. Madden, vol. II, p. 532.

and places have given scope to their most savage instincts. For that very reason it must also have been in the beer halls—especially in such halls as Heorot—that barbarians acquired the power of repressing these impulses. In the collection of proverbs and saws known as *Hóvamól* it is noticed how a beer feast reveals a man's lack of wit or lack of self-restraint<sup>1</sup>, and how many the precautions are which a banqueter must observe<sup>2</sup>, and how talk at the feast reveals a man's cleverness<sup>3</sup>. Beowulf is held up to us as the type of a perfect hero and the poet numbers among his virtues his gentleness at the feast<sup>4</sup>. But of course the beer hall is most important in the history of Germanic and Old English civilisation, because it was the home of poetry<sup>5</sup>.

III. *We turn from this picture of a civilisation, to study the type of hero which it produced, and the type of enemy which it most feared. Grendel and his dam and Beowulf are neither allegories nor folk-traditions, except so far as they can represent the good or evil of the age.*

In *Beowulf*, Heorot is an essential factor in all that is noblest in the hero's career. The poet does not only linger with unmistakeable enjoyment over the spirit of hospitality and fellowship and courtesy which seem native to the hall, he extols Beowulf as its defender. The hall is bound up with the man's two greatest feats and his proudest title to fame. It is, of course, well recognised that the basis of the story was the very common theme of the hobgoblin or troll who haunts a house and cannot be expelled till the owner invokes the aid of a stranger. Such, in its simplest form, was the episode which one story-teller handed on to the next, each adding the tone and spirit of his own age. Thus by the time that the poem reaches us, a knowledge of its origin throws but little light on the developed idea. It is as though one tried to explain Browning's *Pompilia* by tracing the history of the patient Griselda. In the present form of the epic, Grendel stands for all that was baneful to civilisation. It is not urged that the

<sup>1</sup> No. xvii.

<sup>4</sup> ll. 2180-3.

<sup>2</sup> Nos. xxxii and xxxiii.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Beow.* ll. 2105-14.

<sup>3</sup> No. lvii.

poet deliberately allegorised the forces of evil, though some such intention may not have been very far from his mind. In fact Müllenhoff thought that Grendel represented the stormy North Sea of early spring, Grendel's dam the depths of the ocean, and the dragon the advent of wild weather in autumn. Laistner and Kögel believed that Beowulf was the wind which drives away the pestilential swamps and Golther looked on Grendel as the symbol of combined storm and pestilence<sup>1</sup>. Prof. Chambers<sup>2</sup> dismisses these theories and argues that the idea of the monsters and of their slayer all came from folk-tales, and rightly so, since the poet must have become very philosophical and his audiences very sophisticated before he consciously symbolised the difficulties and defects of his time in two or three allegorical figures, after the manner of Milton or Goethe. Such constructive talents are the product of an analytical age. But without becoming one of those *mythographes possédés si souvent de la manie d'interprétation*, a poet could portray an enemy of man only by giving him attributes such as suggest an allegory. The inclination to visualise a fear is irresistible. For instance, Pausanias<sup>3</sup>, who was something of a sceptic, after truthfully describing the Straits of Messina as lashed by winds and caught continually in a heavy swell, adds quite naturally that the water swarms so thickly with monsters that the air is polluted. It is noticeable that neither Grendel's nor his mother's appearance is described. It is implied that both were more or less of human form and of gigantic stature, but otherwise the early audiences were left to draw on their own preconceived notions. They were probably expected to bear in mind some such picture as those of Hrapp<sup>4</sup>, or Thormod<sup>5</sup> described in the Icelandic sagas, or the troll-wife<sup>6</sup> who nearly vanquished Grettir. But the poet spares no pains to describe their habits and mode of life. Here at least he seems to have found something new to tell the world. The two pests typify the lack of all humanising tendencies. They live apart from

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Uhland in *Germania*, II, 349. *Handbuch der Germ. Mythologie*, 1895, 173.

<sup>2</sup> *Beowulf: An Introduction*, chap. II.

<sup>3</sup> v., xxv, I.

<sup>5</sup> *Hávarðssaga*, II.

<sup>4</sup> *Laxdælasaga*, xxiv.

<sup>6</sup> *Grettissaga*, LXV.

the abodes of men in marshes or fen lands, or by a fiord, or at the bottom of a deep pool, in a region shrouded by mist, in a place such as human beings have learnt to shun. It was of course an almost universal belief that pools and cataracts were haunted by daemons. No doubt the movement and power of water suggested the presence of supernatural life<sup>1</sup>. But it must also be remembered that the Germanic peoples were settlers, who had been at war with forests and swamps for generations, and hated them as the French Canadians even now hate trees. The female monster is moved by the primitive maternal instinct, but neither is like a human being in any other respect, and though the dam is said to have drawn a dagger<sup>2</sup>, it is clear that neither of them understand much about the use of arms which are the pride of fighting men. The monsters trust to brute force; Grendel has the gripping force of thirty men; and yet they are endowed with what warriors continually dreaded to meet among their best equipped and armoured adversaries—invulnerability<sup>3</sup>. The monster which, according to primitive legends<sup>4</sup>, lurked at the bottom of a waterfall or a whirlpool, was of the nature of a huge serpent. It was merely filled with an instinct to destroy, and it waited for its victims. But Grendel is aggressive and purposeful. What mostly stirs his envy and hatred is the sound of revelry and especially of singing in a beer hall<sup>5</sup>. His war against this institution is ruthless, and he maintains the feud by crimes particularly abhorrent to the thegns of Heorot. There was an old proverb *nocturnum monstis certamen, diurnum hominibus congruere*<sup>6</sup>. But these monsters do not only prowl by night, they murder sleeping men. Thus they are monsters of a very different order from such an ogre as Polyphemos<sup>7</sup>. The Kyklops has the secretiveness and timidity of all uncivilised life and the poet who portrayed him was actuated by curiosity and interest. The author of *Beowulf* had different motives. Grendel and his mother are not merely predatory, like Cacus<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Post*, chap. II, § 1.

<sup>2</sup> ll. 433–40.

<sup>3</sup> *Post*, chap. II, § 6.

<sup>4</sup> *The Golden Bough: The Magic Art*, vol. II, chap. XII, § 3.

<sup>5</sup> l. 86.

<sup>6</sup> *Saxo*, VII, lxvi<sup>b</sup>, p. 330.

<sup>7</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. IV, § 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Vergil, Aen.* VIII.

They are too persistent and purposeful. They symbolise, however accidentally, what the really great man of the age had to overcome. In order that Beowulf may appear the more glorious, his victims must be all that was hated and feared; the enemies of all that was most prized. So the scene of their depredations develops into the famous beer hall.

The warrior who conquers such adversaries is worthy of his victory. It has been explained that the poetic charm and epic power of the Homeric heroes are found partly in their intense admiration for strength and vitality. So an Achean chieftain could satisfy completely his ideal and could yet be an egoist ingrain. In fact the noblest and greatest of the warriors on both sides cared only for their fame, which assured their supremacy, and all the joys of power. Granted prowess and beauty, they were perfect in themselves<sup>1</sup>. Even Sarpedon would not have sacrificed his ease in Priam's quarrel, had he not realised that he must in any case soon leave this world. Beowulf is like these more ancient heroes in that he too seeks his chief reward in fame and feels that life is too short to spend ignobly<sup>2</sup>. But his outlook and his ideals are higher and less self-centred. When he has been welcomed as a guest at Heorot and Wealtheow has handed to him the cup, he declares his own idea of a warrior's self-devotion in the *béot* which would be expected of him<sup>3</sup>. Though he is as zealous in the pursuit of fame as was Achilles or Diomed, he seeks for it in a wider and more civilised field: in the service of others. How did this hero come into existence? Was he invented by the poet or is he an historical character recreated from some half-traditional recollection, or is he, like Grendel, an evolution from a series of folk-tales? An immense amount of industry and of genuine scholarship have been devoted to answering this question. It has been ably argued that the Beowulf-story is one of a not uncommon type, being very similar to the *Grettissaga* and slightly similar to *Bothvar Biarki*<sup>4</sup>. It has also been argued that the original idea, underlying the legend, is that of a youth of heroic hardihood, who is

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. II, § 5.

<sup>2</sup> ll. 1383-9.

<sup>3</sup> ll. 633-9.

<sup>4</sup> See ed. Boer, Halle, 1900.

nurtured in a bear's den. By accepting this explanation many discrepancies and anomalies will disappear. Amongst other things we shall now be able to understand why, in an age so justly proud of its armour and weapons, the perfect hero is imagined to conquer by "hugging."<sup>1</sup>

It is true that mythical warriors were often imagined to have been nurtured by wild beasts. Hyginus has compiled a list of these *qui lacte ferino nutriti sunt*<sup>2</sup> and the reader can add to the other names that of Achilles, the most famous of all<sup>3</sup>. But there is no tradition that they showed the influence of their upbringing except in their spirit. Again there are innumerable instances of heroes wrestling with wild beasts, especially in childhood. Olrik<sup>4</sup> has collected many examples. But they do not appear to have been bred to these feats in the lairs of wild beasts. Finally, though we find very ancient *motifs* recurring again and again in epic poetry, audiences do not seem to have been unduly conservative. The young men in the *Odyssey* clamoured for the newest ballads, and the author of *Beowulf* has certainly made some attempt to bring his story up to date in history<sup>5</sup> as well as in equipment. So if some ancient legend of wrestling is retained, it must be because the hero could thereby display his manhood to more effect, as did Herakles when he slew the Nemean lion<sup>6</sup>, or Achilles when he strangled Kyknos<sup>7</sup>. The poet of *Beowulf* seems to have been possessed by two ideas. One that it was now possible to imagine a hero who passed from one kingdom to another, glorious in arms, princely at the banquet, honoured by his peers, and yet employed in something nobler and higher than bloodshed and rapine. Secondly, that though mighty with the sword, he could yet face an enemy immune to battle wounds<sup>8</sup>, and endowed with more than berserker strength and ruthlessness. That is why Beowulf is invincible as a wrestler and a hunter.

<sup>1</sup> For an able review of the whole question see R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction*, chap. II and pt IV, *Append. H.*

<sup>2</sup> CCLII.

<sup>3</sup> Apoll. *Bibl.* III, xiii, 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Danmarks Hetedigtning*, chap. VIII, § 7.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Hygelac=Chochilaicus. See Greg. de Tours, *Hist. Frank.* III, 3; also *Beow.* II, 2025 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Apoll. *Bibl.* II, v, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ovid, *Metam.* XII, 70-140.

<sup>8</sup> *Ante*, pp. 7, 14; *post*, chap. II, § 6.

His powers of "hugging," whencesoever derived, serve to establish his daring and his fortitude.

IV. *To appreciate the inner spirit of the poem, we must look to the passages in which the poet has felt the deepest inspiration. There we shall find an atmosphere which is neither romantic nor picturesque. The purpose of the poet was to suggest terror and thereby to indicate the most formidable of Beowulf's adversaries.*

To understand this aspect of the epic, we must turn for a moment to its poetry. If the reader wishes to understand the significance and the inner meaning of any composition, he must study the passages which have the most fire and imagination. In the case of *Beowulf*, this poetic enthusiasm is not hard to find. So far we have concerned ourselves chiefly with the origin and setting of the poem. When we have considered the actual narrative, we have kept our attention on those passages in which men deal with each other at greetings, speeches, entertainments and the exchange of courtesies. These passages are spirited and dignified; they have the epic touch; but they are not the finest parts of the poem. The minstrel seems to be most profoundly inspired when his hero is facing the complex and spiritual dangers, which are felt before they are seen. It has several times been noticed that brave and honoured chieftains in the Achean or Trojan hosts were subject to the normal instinct of fear; and that their greatness partly arose from their ability to reckon with craven thoughts<sup>1</sup>. The great Germanic, Frankish and Irish warriors are not so ready to confess to his inferiority; in fact a perfect warrior would be immune to such weakness. So Beowulf is called upon to achieve his victories in the face of discouragements more subtle and insidious: an atmosphere of terror. We know that these are the most tragic moments in the hero's career, because, in describing them, the poet rises to his greatest heights.

Fear is simply the too lively appreciation of your own vulnerability, but terror is a product of the imagination. It arises from things which you do not clearly see, nor are

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. II, § 5; chap. III, §§ 2, 5-8.

wholly within the range of your experience, but which you surmise. It is a shrinking of the spirit in the presence of something whose powers seem all the more deadly because you cannot gauge them, and do not know what to expect. Hence terror is generally concerned with what is abortive, or morbid, or supernatural. There can be no doubt that the poet of *Beowulf* aims at awakening such emotions in the breasts of his audience. Grendel and his mother are invested with the terrors of the unknown. It is imagined that their lairs are hidden from men and that the monsters, who are armed with spells and sorcery, are allied to the powers of night<sup>1</sup>. A warrior, who had resolved to encounter them, must also face the unexpected dangers of darkness<sup>2</sup>. And then with something like the sensation of a nightmare we hear

*Com on vanre niht  
Scriðan sceadu-genga<sup>3</sup>.*

But the poet reserves his most powerful effects for the abode of Grendel's mother. It must be remembered that the warrior, having vanquished Grendel, might be fairly confident of mastering the older female adversary in fair fight. His achievement was, more than anything, a victory over terror. Prof. Chambers complains that the description "does not convey any very clear picture" and conjectures that this scene in *Beowulf*, like the corresponding one in *Grettissaga*, is modelled on an original version "in which the monsters live in a hole under the waterfall."<sup>4</sup> Such may be the case, but it does not therefore follow that the poet is embarrassed by his material. Whether or no the details of his description are confused, they produce a very clear and unified effect. It must be remembered that at the back of the Teutonic and Scandinavian mind there was a world of superstitious susceptibilities waiting to be aroused. Whereas they prided themselves on not shrinking from the most formidable foe in the open, they seem to have retained all the primitive dread<sup>5</sup> of what was concealed. Fafnir, the treasure guarding dragon, quelled his enemies with

<sup>1</sup> ll. 159-63. <sup>2</sup> ll. 646-52. <sup>3</sup> ll. 703-4. <sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.* chap. II, sect. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *The Golden Bough*, pt II, *Taboo and the Perils of the Soul*, chap. II; *Scape-goat*, chap. II.

*aegis-hjalmr*<sup>1</sup>, the helmet which could strike terror. The *mara*, by which primitive Teutons meant the apparition of a dead man, had grown in later times to mean a kind of murderous nightmare such as the visitant which crushed Vanlandi to death<sup>2</sup>. Sigibert's army was so nervous when marching against the Huns that the men believed they saw spectres, and fled before they came to close quarters with their enemies<sup>3</sup>. Swanhwid beheld evil shapes swarming round Ragnar and Thorwald at night<sup>4</sup>. A woman gifted with second sight used to see all the spirits of the land following Buck-Beorn when he went to the moot<sup>5</sup>. The poet is obviously playing upon this kind of apprehensiveness. His purpose is to accumulate signs of menace and of danger. For the same reason, he suggests the unknown terrors of a forest. Sarrazin<sup>6</sup> has argued that Grendel's lair was really to be found in Roskilde fiord, whereat Prof. Chambers objects that though there may have been fewer cultivated fields and more beech-trees, "the scenery may have been less tame, but can hardly have been less peaceful." The scenery can well have been immeasurably less peaceful. The professor forgets the effect of uncleared forest growth. Even now Canadian forests present in places an indescribably weird and disquieting appearance with their tangle of undergrowth and fallen trees, and these jungles can be found in quite civilised districts, not far from established townships. Yet the modern traveller has far less reason than the explorer or hunter of the seventh century to look upon such scenery with misgiving. From of old woods were held in horror. The infernal regions were often supposed to be surrounded by them<sup>7</sup>. Servius gives the reason: *tenebras et lustra significat, in quibus feritas et libido dominantur*<sup>8</sup>. Old Bohemian songs tell us that Trás and Strakh, the two spirits of terror, lurk in the gloomy recesses of forests, ready to pounce on men, even when advancing in bands, and grip their necks till a scream is wrung from them<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Reginsmól*, xiv; *Fafnismól*, xvi, xvii.

<sup>2</sup> *Heimskr.* xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Greg. de Tours, *Hist. Frank.* iv, 29.

<sup>4</sup> *Saxo*, II, xii<sup>b</sup>, p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> *Landnáma-bóc*, IV, 17, 3.

<sup>6</sup> *P.B.B.* xi, 167-170.

<sup>7</sup> T. Wright, *Purgatory of St Patrick*, p. 22. Appendix, p. 183.

<sup>8</sup> *Aen.* VI, 131.

<sup>9</sup> Grimm, *Teut. Myth.* chap. xii.

We must approach Grendel's lair with such feelings as these. Above all we must dissociate our sensations from anything romantic. Nowadays the vivid presentation of weird scenery gives pleasure. We look on this noisome pool with its fantastic growths, much as we look on the rocks at Ploumanach in North Brittany. Those monstrous shapes, like Chimaeras frozen into stone, on that wild, irregular cliff, have the power of stimulating wonder, and of half persuading the tourist to believe in the stories which he knows to be false. So we are always attracted by what carries the mind out of itself, such as vastness or irregularity of outline. Filled with such expectations, we turn to the story of the duel at the fiord. As we know that we are safe anywhere in an hospitable country we look for the same kind of sensations as we find in reading *The Ancient Mariner*. But to Danes, Geats and Saxons, the thought of dim, uncanny wildernesses, teeming with weird and forbidding shapes was to think of realities. Our minds are at rest, so as we scan the landscape, we should probably be most pleased to behold a precipice. The Anglo-Saxon would think of self-preservation, and his eyes would be riveted on a thicket. Compare the description<sup>1</sup> of Eyda-skog with its dense undergrowth and gloomy dells (*fruticibus predensum et vallibus quam maxime opacum*). It was defended by a headlong torrent, whose huge volumes of water foamed over hidden reefs. Are we to suppose that the footmarks leading through the rime to this romantic and suggestive retreat raised any feelings but fear? On the contrary the adventurers could only force themselves to proceed by an effort of will—*domitus virtute timor, contemptumque temeritate periculum*.

These considerations are essential to anyone who would appreciate the style of *Beowulf* or the character of its hero. He and his retainers find their way to the lair, by tracing the bloodstained footprints, but he cannot tell what other dangers that ghastly hiding place may hold. The monster lurks at the bottom of a lonely pool fed by underground rains, in the midst of precipices and overshadowed by a forest. The water is so loathsome that a stag would rather be caught by hunters than

<sup>1</sup> *Saxo*, vii, lxxiiii<sup>b</sup>, p. 368.

plunge into it. By night fire plays on its surface and strange shapes are descried prowling round its shores, as the mists of evening fall<sup>1</sup>. All that men had reason to fear in deserts, wolf-cliffs, treacherous quagmires, bleak crags, caverns and frost-bound forests with their unexplored and impassable recesses—all that was mysterious, ghostly, sinister and dark—must be braved by the man who would force his way into Grendel's lair. Even a boor could not listen to such descriptions without shuddering. Beowulf is an epic hero because he did not shudder. He faced the unknown powers of darkness and evil, and that is the proof of his magnanimity, his grandeur and his courage. The horror of the place is the measure of his heroism, and the poet bent on glorifying the warrior, could safely allow himself a few exaggerations and discrepancies.

It is noticeable that we get no glimpse into the hero's mind at either crisis of his fate. The poet who narrates the third episode—the killing of the dragon—tells how Wiglaf overcame his natural shrinking, by calling to mind the comradeship and loyalty of their beer feasts<sup>2</sup>. No such monologue is put into Beowulf's mouth before he encounters either Grendel or Grendel's dam. There is nothing like the brief but stirring speeches by which the Homeric warriors sometimes nerved themselves to face a too-formidable enemy. At first, this omission looks like a defect in the poet's art. At other times the warrior is not tongue-tied, and now we expect to be told how a man achieved the greatest of all feats; the conquest of his own weakness. As we are disappointed, we conclude that the author of these spirited and graphic verses could not rise to such heights. And yet, is it not at least possible that this hero does not speak when facing danger, because there is nothing for him to say? Is it really too much to suggest that he remains silent because the poet is true to nature? If the Homeric warriors voice their troubled thoughts before facing or avoiding some menace, it is because they do not disguise, even from themselves, their tremor of fear. They are men in the grip of apprehension, and those who foresee their peril, either give way at once to panic, or control themselves by

<sup>1</sup> ll. 1345-82.

<sup>2</sup> ll. 2633-68.

keeping their minds active. Besides, some of the Homeric monologues may have been introduced to make the particular situation more dramatic; to enlist the sympathies of the audience. Their presence may be due to their ~~indefiniteness~~, to the fact that they give new ideas to people not engaged in fighting. But both the psychological and artistic problems of *Beowulf* are different. There is another kind of courage which consists, not exactly of indifference, but of selflessness. The hero is so intent on the deed that he forgets all about himself. In fact some modern men who cannot repress the introspective faculty can yet remain so impersonal in the face of danger, that they cultivate a dual mentality. They feel that they are a third person, watching some one else running the risk, and are filled with curiosity as to what will happen next<sup>1</sup>. Such detachment is not of course to be looked for in *Beowulf*; he belongs to the more primitive order of men, who think of their enemy and not of themselves. He does not tell us how he overcame his fear, because he had no fear to overcome. *Others* feel the terror, but *his* serenity is the token of his heroism. Probably the original audiences of the epic appreciated this silence. It is at least likely that *Beowulf*, as we have it, was not composed for the more miscellaneous and susceptible audiences who expect from literature a new sensation, and would be curious to know how the warrior felt at a crisis such as they themselves would never expect to experience. We may assume that it was intended for men of action, who realise that great achievements are at their climax impulsive, and herein is another argument that the poem has come down to us in its second or aristocratic stage<sup>2</sup>.

In these respects *Beowulf* fulfils and does not fall short of the Germanic ideal. But quite apart from his thoughts at the crisis of the struggle, what was the spirit in which he faced the adventure, and what his mode of attack? If the hero personifies the noblest attributes of his time, his way of approaching and

<sup>1</sup> See letter to *The Times*, 17th Feb. 1923, *Confessions of a Big-Game Hunter*, or Dr Sayce's experiences when caught at Nantes in 1870 and condemned to be shot as a spy, in *Reminiscences*, by the Rev. A. H. Sayce, 1923.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of Chadwick's four stages in the evolution of epic poetry, see *ante*, vol. I, chap. vi, § 3.

carrying out his task should be specially significant. We find that in Icelandic sagas, the warrior who undertakes to rid a house of its *revenant* nearly always has to wrestle, although the human is armed and the troll is vulnerable. Generally the goblin seizes him before he has time to strike. So it looks as if a struggle of this kind was more or less imposed by tradition. If so, the poet has none the less adapted the conventions to his own purpose. Beowulf confronts his supernatural adversaries, in a mood which at first looks like sheer bravado or epic exaggeration. His retainers lie down with him in the beer hall, never expecting to live through the night, and the monster leaving its lair on the misty moorland, strides on towards its prey, through the favouring darkness. But Beowulf lays his sword and armour aside. As Grendel carries no weapon, he needs none himself. So we recognise that there is something grander than a soldier's trust in his weapons:

*hûru Gedâ leôd georne trûvode  
môdgan mägnes<sup>1</sup>,*

and it was this sublime fortitude which saved him. When Grendel's dam starts her raids to avenge her son and the Geatish warrior tracks down this second monster to her lair, the enterprise seems so desperate that his companions shrink from following him into the pool; they cower among the rocks and soon relinquish hope of seeing their chieftain again. This time Beowulf does not discard his weapons, and while diving through the pool, his armour does indeed save him from the tusks of the sea-beasts that swarmed round him<sup>2</sup>. When he reaches the cavern and closes with the monster, he still relies on his sword Hrunting, but that well-proved falchion now fails him. Its edge refuses to bite. This is the most tragic moment in the hero's career. Homer tells us how a missile is now and then turned awry by supernatural power and at one crisis Pandaros almost despaired of his archery, because his skill was baffled by some god<sup>3</sup>. Such beliefs must once have been universal among fighting men, and we have seen how the Acheans overcame this dread. They convinced them-

<sup>1</sup> *ll. 670-1.*

<sup>2</sup> *ll. 1510-12.*

<sup>3</sup> *Il. v, 180 ff.*

selves that the hostility of a daemon could either be mollified by persuasion or defeated by the help of another daemon<sup>1</sup>. Northern warriors were less imaginative and had more confidence in their weapons. Thus when Halfdan fought with Grim (*eximiarum virium athleta*) and found that his adversary's glance was able to blunt his sword, he at once flung it away and drew another which was proof against magic<sup>2</sup>. Biorn the berserker had an enchanted hide, but Gisli borrowed Kol's "Gray-steel" and cut through it<sup>3</sup>. Beowulf's ordeal belongs to a yet higher stage of civilisation. He also indignantly flings the brand aside, for all its jewellery and metalwork<sup>4</sup>, and relying solely on his strength, endurance and courage, he grapples with his enemy:

*strenge getrûvode,  
mund-gripe mägenes. Svd sceal man dôn,  
þonne he ät guðe gegân þenceð  
longsumne lof, ná ymb his lif cearað*<sup>5</sup>.

It is true that he ends this desperate struggle with a blow from a gigantic sword too huge for any but himself to wield, forged by the giant god Weland, and therefore proof against bewitchment. Thus the epic pride in weapons is vindicated. But he would never have survived to find this relic among the battle gear in the cave, nor would his armour, the *here-net hearde*, have withstood the brute's dagger, if his heroism had not been something more than a warrior's confidence in his skill at arms.

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. III, § 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Saga Gisla Surssonar*, I.

<sup>2</sup> *Saxo*, VII, lxvi<sup>b</sup>, p. 328.

<sup>4</sup> I. 1531.

<sup>5</sup> II. 1534-7.

## CHAPTER II

### RELIGIOUS SENTIMENTS IN EARLY NORTHERN POETRY

**I**N the foregoing chapter it has been urged that *Beowulf* is truly an epic in its spirit, interests and aspirations. This impression is strengthened when we remember that the poem assumed something like its present form and was enjoyed by its audiences in an age of settlement after conquest, such as the first admirers of the *Iliad* may have known. The Anglo-Saxon invasion of England began in the fifth century and was complete by the beginning of the seventh. *Beowulf* must almost certainly have assumed its present form in the following epoch, and represents the passion and prowess of a nation who are holding by their strength and fortitude what their ancestors won after more than a century of daring and endeavour. Early English history is too well known to need recapitulating in this connection, but we have still to ask what succession of spiritual experiences contributed to the creation of such an ideal. What is the religious background on which Beowulf stands out? This dauntless and irresistible warrior, who was yet so courteous in his manners and so loyal and devoted in all his enterprises, will not exercise less influence over our higher sympathies and wider interests, if we realise in what degree he exemplifies man's efforts to achieve grandeur and self-sufficiency. To what age does he really belong? What ideal does he represent? We have seen that his origin has often been discussed, but we are concerned with the fully developed warrior. We have noted in what respects he differs from the typical Homeric hero, but whom does he resemble? Are his qualities those which for centuries had been the ideal of his race, or is he the last and most modern product, peculiar to a phase of civilisation which was then new?

To answer these questions, we must abandon the beaten track of recognised epic poetry. As in the case of Homer<sup>1</sup>, so now, we must make a *détour* among the folklore of the Teutonic

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. III.

and Scandinavian peoples and consider the religious beliefs which accompanied the succeeding phases of northern civilisation; and we must then see what type of hero characterised each stage of this mythological evolution. By this means we shall come to appreciate more fully the significance of *Beowulf*. But soon the digression will itself become a high-road thronged with figures which are epic and therefore in their own right demand our attention.

i. *Traces of the growth of terror in the northern imagination. The transition from animism to gigantism. Fear of frost giants; mankind like a fortified settlement in a land of supernatural enemies.*

Our main object is to form some idea of the imaginary dangers and difficulties which the northern peoples successively invented and overcame. So at the very outset it should be noted that we can still just detect traces of a very early pre-Heroic Age when primitive man was not, of course, secure, much less serene, but had probably taken the measure of his surroundings and was resigned to them. In that far-off time they seem already to have believed that the spirit or life of a man was something imperishable and unconquerable, a sort of follower or occupier of the body, a breath which could leave its tenement in sleep, and at death could bring its vitality into the soil or rejoin the impetuous winds, or resort to the mountains and waters, the true homes of elemental power, or change into an animal, or continue to hover round the body from which it was severed. Probably the chief imaginative stimulus of that age arose from an appreciation of what these powers could accomplish. The most speculative and philosophical appear to have been impressed by the similarities between each of their bodies and the earth as they knew it. Such ideas are recorded in the Prologue to the *Younger Edda*<sup>1</sup>, and Snorri seems to be reproducing a genuinely primordial belief. At that time men probably had little reason to look far beyond the common ground of this microcosm and macrocosm. Their worst enemy was, in all likelihood, to be

<sup>1</sup> Chap. i.

found among those life spirits which took the form of the *wer-wolf* or which, after death, returned to haunt the living. The spirits who did not originate from man, the elves, dwarves, kobolds, pucks and some wind and water sprites who could tell the future, seem to have been friendly to human beings. Perhaps the nicors and mermen were thought of at this time, but they were not aggressively malevolent. The other gods were nature deities, suggestive of a pastoral and more or less peaceful existence. We have seen how many of the Greek gods were originally imagined to be spirits of air, water, or vegetation<sup>1</sup>. In the same way there is an old Icelandic legend that Fornjótr lived near Kattegat and that his son Norr had three sons Hlér, Logi, and Kári who became rulers of sea, fire and air. Possibly some sort of primitive fertility drama came into existence at this time, with its disguises, its slaying of the male and its ritual suggestive of marriage, generation and rejuvenation<sup>2</sup>.

We do not know how long men remained content with this narrow animism, but their next step seems to have been an effort to conceive of the forces which govern the earth, as of something infinitely vaster than man himself. There was the serpent Mithgarthsorm, one of the children of Loki and Angrboda, which encircled the earth and the eagle Hraesvelg<sup>3</sup> whose wings produce the wind, as it sits on the edge of Heaven. Gradually the peaceful animism of a former age was abandoned and men thought out a *gigantism* full of horror and menace. The congealed ice and drizzling rain of the North, the fiery sparks and glowing heat of the South, blended in Ginnungagap, the Yawning Void, to produce Ymir or Aurgelmir, the sire of the Rime-giants<sup>4</sup>. Meanwhile the cow Audumla, licking the salt ice blocks, produced the first man Búri<sup>5</sup>. His sons slew Ymir and out of his huge body made the earth<sup>6</sup>. So the ancestors or rather the future creators of human beings accomplished their first great act of self-assertion. But one branch

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. III.

<sup>2</sup> B. S. Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, 1920.

<sup>3</sup> *Voluspo*, L; *Vafthruthnismól*, XXXVI, XXXVII. <sup>4</sup> *Gylf.* IV and V.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* VI. <sup>6</sup> *Vafthruthnismól*, XXI; *Grimnismól*, XL, XLI.

of Ymir's descendants, Bergelmir and his household, escaped and so perpetuated the race of Rime-giants. It seems now to have been believed that the blending of ice, rain and fire which produced this monstrous brood was ~~the~~ drop by drop<sup>1</sup>. The giants retained the ferocity which would be expected from their origin; so a younger and perhaps less Titanic generation of Búri's descendants had now to create the world as we know it with a citadel, Míhgarth, in the centre and the giants on the outskirts of the earth<sup>2</sup>.

These fantastic stories are very similar to those produced by other civilisations. In Mexican, Babylonian, Vedic and Brahman cosmologies, we learn that parts of the world were created out of the bodies of gods or giants. If, in the earlier animistic ages, men were sacrificed to maintain the course of nature, it is not unlikely that such rites would afterwards be thus misinterpreted<sup>3</sup>. So they became the expression of a very different sentiment. Men had come to regard themselves as a hostile settlement, surrounded by supernatural enemies. Mortals were threatened from the east by the witches and trolls of Ironwood and from the south by the fiery sons of Múspell. Though the sun and moon are descendants of men<sup>4</sup>, night and day are giants<sup>5</sup>. Even thus early men seem to have formed an expectation that this disordered creation would one day perish. The sun and moon were expected to be devoured by forces in the shape of wolves<sup>6</sup>, and the bridge Bifröst, which connects earth and Heaven, was one day to be broken<sup>7</sup>. It appears that many primitive peoples began by supposing their gods to be mortal. Probably the allusions in late classical writers to the graves of Zeus, Dionysos and Apollo are the result of very early beliefs preserved and revived. But other civilisations do not seem to have impressed the idea so deeply with the sense of good and evil in conflict; or perhaps the northern races had already formed the idea that most of this imperfect world was a blend of what was friendly and hostile. Besides the *rimethurses*, they may already have believed in Mimir, the gigantic but peaceful spirit of streams and waters,

<sup>1</sup> *Vafthruthnismól*, xxxi. <sup>2</sup> *Gylf.* viii. <sup>3</sup> Frazer, *G.B.* pt vii, chap. viii, § 6.  
<sup>4</sup> *Gylf.* xi. <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* x. <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* xii. <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* xiii.

afterwards famed for his wisdom and friendship with Othin, or the giants that were turned into stone and became mountains. The ash of Yggdrasill, where the gods were later believed to reside and give judgment, struck its roots into Niflheim and the realm of the giants as well as into the region of the Aesir<sup>1</sup>. But there must certainly have intervened a period when Evil was believed to predominate and when man's imagination was busy picturing all the possible forms of horror and abomination. One thinks of Skirnir threatening Gerth with the evils which his magic staff could bring upon her, if she did not grant Freyr access to Gymer's daughter. She is menaced with all the terrors of the elemental world: banishment to the giants' home, loneliness among inhuman monsters, drinking only filth, a prey to the ravages of her own passions<sup>2</sup>.

This gigantism which arose in what we have already called the Age of Terror<sup>3</sup>, probably belongs to some period previous to the age of migrations or at any rate received its suggestion from some such time. We do not know the events which brought about the great invasions of Europe, from the earliest inroads of the Acheans and Philistines to that of the Danes and Normans, but the causes must often have been such as men then considered supernatural. In some cases the enemy which drove them from their homes must have been a gradual change in their surroundings such as a rising or sinking of the level of the ground, thus interfering with their water supply, or the encroachment of the sea, or a change in climate and seasons; or again some sudden disaster such as a volcanic eruption, a tornado or a disastrous landslide, which would make them think that some powerful deity of the neighbourhood was their irreconcileable enemy. So the Phaiakians were supposed to have emigrated because of the Kyklopes<sup>4</sup>, and the men of Thera were bidden by an oracle to occupy the island of Platea, because during seven years there fell no rain in their own country<sup>5</sup>. The Neuroi had to leave the borders of Skythia and settle among the Budinoi because they were

<sup>1</sup> *Voluspó*, xxxix; *Grimnismól*, xxxii, xxxv.

<sup>2</sup> *Skirnismól*, xxvii–xxxvi.

<sup>4</sup> *Od.* vi, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ante*, vol. i, chap. iii, § 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Herod.* iv, 150–1.

overrun with serpents<sup>1</sup>, and we are told that the descendants of Gambaruc, when their land was stricken with sterility, drew lots to decide who should seek a new land<sup>2</sup>. Glum left Myrkárdal and settled in Thverbrek in Öxnadal, because a landslip destroyed some of his buildings. In most cases the causes of the movement have not been preserved even in legendary form, but we hear much of the increase and multiplication of supernatural terrors. The old friendly nature spirits begin to lose their power; Hrimnir gives birth to the two giants, Heith the witch and Hrossthjof the horse-thief<sup>3</sup>. It may well have been during this period that the home of the giants was imagined to be Jotunheim, a weird and gruesome island far away on the north-east coast of Scandinavia, reminiscent of the race's earliest and perhaps hardest trials.

II. *The rise of the monster-slaying gods. The story of Thor and of his achievements. The age of bloodshed.*

The next step in human progress was to invent heroes worthy to give battle to these pests, for even if posterity preserved an exaggerated tradition of their racial enemies, they were not likely to picture their forefathers as cowed and ejected by them. So among the broken and incomplete relics of heathendom, we can trace the emergence of the monster-slaying gods, and we shall notice how often their achievements are placed in regions from which the race emigrated. It may not be altogether coincidence that *Beowulf*, whatever the spirit of its present form, is the memory of a continental plague preserved by men who had sought a new home in England. All the branches of the Indo-Germanic stock seem to have brought with them the belief of some nature god of light or the sky, called *Zeús*, *Juppiter*, or *Ziu-Týr*. *Tyr* must once have been the principal god of the Teutonic races, but, like *Ares*, he was no doubt eclipsed by the gods of civilisation and established order, such as *Heimdallr*, also at one time a god of light, and *Freyr*, whom *Tacitus* mistook for *Nerthus*, the god of fertility. But we can still discern the primitive outline of the

<sup>1</sup> Herod. iv, 105.

<sup>2</sup> *Saxo*, viii, lxxxv, p. 418.

<sup>3</sup> *Hyndluljóð*, xxxiv.

god Thor<sup>1</sup>. He was believed at one time to be the spirit of fruitfulness, returning every spring to the land, and as such he became the patron of the peasant folk, and his memory was preserved by them after the more progressive jarls had transferred their allegiance to Othin. He was also pictured as the god of thunder and for that reason was believed to travel in a huge lumbering wain, but his real virtue was as a slayer of monsters. Sometimes he is called *þotti iōtna*, the terror of giants, and like Herakles, he was the champion of both mortals and immortals against the sinister powers. If he brought to the fields every spring the brilliant young god Orvandil, he spent the winters in Jotunheim, warring against the frost giants. In the *Ólafssaga Týggvasonar* he tells how Norway was once occupied by these monsters and how the men who migrated thither engaged his help. The *Thrymskvitha* describes his journey to recover his hammer which the giant Thrym had buried deep beneath the earth and refused to return unless Freyja was given him to wife. So Thor reaches Jotunheim disguised as the female deity and the comedy of his voracious appetite and fierce manners is changed to tragedy and triumph when he recovers his hammer. According to another legend the adventurer undertook a long journey to slay the child of Loki and Angrbotha, the vast sea-monster that encircles the earth on its outer edge. So, accompanied by the giant Hymir, Thor goes aboard his ship. With the head of the ox Himinrjódr, which is supposed to symbolise the northern polar light, he angles for the serpent and begins to drag the monster out of the water. Then Hymir cuts the line and the victim escapes, but Thor turns upon the treacherous friend and slays him with his hammer.

These and such-like legends come down to us stamped with the mark of different ages and civilisations. Some of them are as recent as the early Christian epoch and in their surviving form are not untouched by the symbolism of folklore. But they none the less betray signs of extreme antiquity and indicate, or rather, foreshadow the beginning of the Heroic Age. The

<sup>1</sup> See E. Mogk, *Grundriss*, 1 Bd, vi Absch. xii Kap. The similarity between Thor and Herakles has been noticed by B. S. Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda*, etc. chap. xii, p. 135.

tales of warfare among men, out of which the epic has generally reached its highest development, in most instances belong to a more recent epoch, when the terrors of the old country were left behind and the warriors were fighting a winning battle in the promised land. Thus the legends of Achilles and Hektor are more modern than the legends of Herakles. In fact there is sometimes a kind of opposition between the two types of heroism. In the *Harbarthsljóth*, a “flying” is recorded between Thor and Othin, when the *þúrir-þórr* wishes to be ferried across the water<sup>1</sup>. But whereas Thor can boast of victories over giants, Othin can only claim victories in battles and in love affairs. Thus there must have intervened a period when war and bloodshed for its own sake was the highest ideal of men, or at least of the warrior caste. This age may well have sown the seeds of the great epics, but is not the time of their fruition. It was an interregnum, when such gods as Ares and Tyr were supreme. The full and mature Heroic Age comes during the period of settlement.

III. *A brief period of spiritual equilibrium, perhaps connected with the Roman period, when human beings found themselves equal to their destiny. But progress brings new difficulties as well as new ideals. The rising generations embark on a new era of conflict. Othin the type of this development. The significance of runes.*

We have now to discuss this age of settlement or at any rate of marked progress in material civilisation and in ideals. Up to the present we have noticed that the history of northern beliefs was darkened by a sense of insecurity, if not by a fear of being overwhelmed. Gradually the succeeding generations seem to have reached an epoch in which men regained confidence, and once again believed themselves to be strong enough to face both their earthly and their spiritual enemies. The gods are imagined to be enshrined and entempled at Ithavoll and to be busy fashioning tools or playing at chess<sup>2</sup>. There is abundance of gold<sup>3</sup>. Besides stories of sheer prowess, we find

<sup>1</sup> E. Mogk, *Grundriss*, I Bd, vi Absch. xii Kap.

<sup>2</sup> *Voluspá*, vii and viii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; *Gylf.* xiv.

pictures of luxury, wealth and brightness. Men imagine a number of divine dwelling places—Breibablik, Glitnir, Him-inbjörg, Valaskjálf, Gimlé—magic halls, high above the earth among the peaks of mountain fastnesses, glittering with jewels or sunlight<sup>1</sup>. Or, again, they talk of Aegir's palace, lighted by gold instead of by fire, while ale comes in of its own accord<sup>2</sup>, and of Skidbladnir the perfect ship, whose sails attract the desired wind, and whose hull and rigging can be folded up and carried in a wallet<sup>3</sup>. One imagines that these charming phantasies arose or were developed in the “Roman period” when contact with Mediterranean civilisation was bringing them the enjoyment of wealth, the consciousness of victory and perhaps also a sense of the natural beauty of the south<sup>4</sup>. These are only guesses, for this age of prosperity and hopefulness soon disappeared, and the stories themselves have come down to us blended with a later pessimism, the result of falling dynasties and internecine feuds<sup>5</sup>. The change is perhaps suggested by the coming of the three “giant women” out of Jotunheim<sup>6</sup>, and man enters upon another phase of unequal conflict against supernatural powers. For instance, the people of this later period seem to have believed in the Well of Urdr, the source of justice, where the gods hold their tribunal and hard by the three Norns dwell. We should expect such a myth to be accepted in an heroic age. But at about the same time men seem to have held that the elf people and the dwarves also exercised the power of Fate in opposition to the Norns, and worked men all the ill that they could<sup>7</sup>. This second period is characterised by a different kind of struggle. Men now employ subtlety, magic and cunning to overcome their enemies, and though final defeat is foreseen they develop a high ideal of intelligence.

In this age the mythological prototype was Othin. Originally he may have been some kind of wind spirit and for that reason was armed with a flashing spear which he flung like lightning

<sup>1</sup> *Grimnismól*, iv–xvii; *Gylf.* xvii.

<sup>2</sup> *Lokasenna*, Prol.

<sup>3</sup> *Gylf.* xliii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ante*, chap. i, § 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ante*, vol. i, chap. ii, § 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Voluspó*, viii.

<sup>7</sup> *Voluspó*, xx; *Fafnismól*, xiii; *Gylf.* xv.

from the sky and possessed only one eye, even as the sun looks through storm clouds. So his home was among the mountains, and he was an insatiable wanderer, a *viator indefessus*, who symbolised the invisible and irresistible force of the winds. In the Age of Wonder, mortals imagined him mounted on Sleipnir<sup>1</sup>, his eight-legged white steed, flying through the air, like a huntsman, followed by his pack of phantom hounds. But the special cult of Othin that we know of, is not of immemorial antiquity. It probably originated somewhere in South Germany, perhaps through contact with Roman civilisation, and was carried northwards by the Franks, the issue of the ancient Sugambri, to the Lombards and Saxons and so to England, and thence back to Denmark. If such be the case we can trace not only the communicative influence of trade, but perhaps also the necessity of cultivating the gods of one's enemies, as the Trojans endeavoured to pay homage to Athena. Sometime near the birth of Christ Othin begins to be thought of as a warrior god and as the rival of Thor<sup>2</sup>. While Harald sacrifices to the older god, his father sacrifices to Othin, and Eirikr follows his example<sup>3</sup>. The older Anglo-Saxon kings traced their ancestry to him. The mountains in which he had formerly dwelt now became the castle of victory, *Sigtún*. As a spirit of the wind, which was like the breath and vitality of man, he had been worshipped as god of the dead, or even of the gallows, where bodies sway in the wind. So he came to be regarded as the Roman Mercury, the psychopomp who conducted the ghosts of the departed to some cavern in the mountains. Perhaps for this reason he was thought to have so much power over the lives of warriors and to be even *Sigfadir* or *Siggautr*, the giver of victory.

By these degrees it is suggested that Othin evolved from a nature spirit to a god of war. Probably, he was at first worshipped by all classes and the Eddic poems<sup>4</sup> still preserve the attitude of the common folk towards this elusive and many-sided deity. Perhaps he was adopted by the warrior

<sup>1</sup> *Grimnismól*, XLIV, and *Poetic Edda*, *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> E. Mogk, *op. cit.* § 58.

<sup>3</sup> F.M.S. v, 250; x, 178. E. Mogk, *op. cit.* § 58.

<sup>4</sup> B. S. Phillpotts, *op. cit.* chap. viii.

class which rose so rapidly in power and importance during the triumphs of the Roman period, because the peasants continued to worship Thor<sup>1</sup>. But as that glorious time verged towards its close, and the rising generations were confronted with newer and more complex difficulties, a higher value began to be placed on intelligence. Mimir's Well becomes the source of wisdom and learning, but it falls into the hands of the giants, and Othin has to give his eye in pledge before he is allowed to drink<sup>2</sup>. The wolf Fenris has to be chained by craft<sup>3</sup>. We have already noticed in Hesiod<sup>4</sup> that when human beings reach a certain stage of civilisation, they become acutely conscious of the multiplicity of their gods, and realise the difficulty of identifying the particular power which at any crisis has to be invoked or appeased. Gangleri confessed to a similar perplexity when interrogating Hárr<sup>5</sup>. As soon as men become sufficiently complex to confront themselves with this problem, they begin to read new meanings into their old stories. For instance, they retell some nature myth, such as the death of Eurydike or Balder, in order to show how difficult it is to understand the gods and how hopeless to bend them to our purposes. Or again, they enjoy stories in which so much depends on illusions. A deity is presented with a drinking horn which he cannot drain, because it is the sea; or a woman whom he cannot throw in wrestling because she is old age<sup>6</sup>. Men now become filled with a desire to look behind the veil; to see in their experiences something more than meets the eye; and so they value as the highest accomplishment the gift of second sight<sup>7</sup>. We find that Othin becomes associated with such tendencies. He becomes less of a warrior and more of a teacher. He instructs and civilises the jarls, the chieftains, the Asas, the demi-gods, the gods themselves. It is probably because of his wisdom that he is pictured as an old man. And what does he teach? Above all, power over the spirit world.

<sup>1</sup> Chadwick, *Heroic Age*, chap. xviii, pp. 395 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Gylf.* xv.

<sup>3</sup> *Gylf.* xxv.

<sup>4</sup> *Ante*, vol. i, chap. vi, § 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Gylf.* xxv.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* XLVI, XLVII. (An excellent account of the legend in *Heroes and Hero-worship*, Lecture 1.) Cf. *ante*, pp. 5, 6.

<sup>7</sup> For bibl. and explanation see A. Olrik, *Danmarks Hætedigtning*, chap. iii, § 1.

By the aid of magic he could change his shape and unearth hidden treasure. He introduced the three great sacrificial feasts and freed men from their fear of departed spirits, teaching them how to lay the dead by cremation and burial mounds<sup>1</sup>. But above all, he discovered the magic power that lay hidden in runes.

The runic alphabet, as we know it, seems to have been elaborated early in the Christian era from Greek or Roman characters, or from a blend of both; and for some centuries it was used on memorial stones, weapons, ornaments, coins, and almost certainly in manuscripts, all over Europe<sup>2</sup>. But the art must also have been confused with the far more ancient practices of sympathetic magic. Very probably witch-doctors and medicine-men began by inventing magic signs which they supposed to be most effective when inscribed or carved on the object to be influenced. By and by they concluded that the same potency could be infused into a piece of wood or bone by this process of engraving, and so the cult became associated with the practice of writing. Thus for a while each gained importance from the other—the secrets of the magician and the wisdom of the written word. Othin, being now the god of civilisation, was bound to be invested with these attributes, so he became at once the patron of poets and the inventor of these “secret signs,” which were used to ward off evil and to win good fortune. The most precious of all were the *malrunes*<sup>3</sup>, which could restore to a tongue the power of speech.

Had it not been for the glamour of romance, and the sacredness of antiquity, these clumsy symbols would soon have been abandoned and forgotten. They vanished as a script from England when the Danes annihilated the English aristocracy, and on the continent we find that between the sixth and the ninth centuries the runic alphabet had decreased from twenty-four to sixteen signs. In the ordinary business

<sup>1</sup> Rydberg, *Teutonic Mythology*, II, § 7.

<sup>2</sup> For bibl. on the subject see B. Dickens, *Runic and Heroic Poems of the Old Teutonic Peoples*, Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> *Mæla*=speak.

of coinage and writing these characters had already begun to be replaced by the Roman script. They had survived only as a tradition of the warrior class; treasured for their association with Othin and their suggestion of supernatural power. A knowledge of them may have become hereditary. In fact they were destined, from the eleventh century onwards, to be supplemented by the “dotted” runes and to maintain an existence till the Renaissance. They were preserved by their legendary and religious atmosphere. The *Hóvamól*<sup>1</sup> and *Sigrdrifumól*<sup>2</sup> recount what these magic symbols could accomplish. Herein lay their strength, but also their weakness. They suggested the romantic powers of witchcraft, but for that very reason, because of the extravagant claims made for their effectiveness, they must often and often have been discredited. They promised too much. The explanation offered in the *Egilssaga* cannot surely have convinced an intelligent pagan of the tenth century. So the history of this magic alphabet illustrates the advent of disillusionment in northern speculations. It must have been realised that the most progressive god of a thoughtful people connected the art of writing and even of verse-making with a superstition which deceived its believers. Such-like experiences await all worshippers of all creeds. The result is generally not so much atheism as the recognition of evil.

#### iv. *The doctrine of evil. The evolution of Loki as its type.*

We noticed that in the age of Hesiod there was a reaction from the idea of hero-gods as friends and auxiliaries. Men ended by finding more satisfaction in supposing themselves to be altogether separated from intercourse with these “proud limitary” deities. They required more complex aids in the spiritual and mental difficulties of life. The deities of the Trojan war were too crude for them; they had seen through the fiction and were abjuring it<sup>3</sup>. The religious history of all races has examples of these attempts to scale the heights with insufficient means, and of the disillusionment which followed.

<sup>1</sup> CXLVII to end, i.e. the so-called *Ljóthal*, esp. CL, CLII, CLVIII.

<sup>2</sup> VI-XIX.

<sup>3</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. vi, § 2.

So it was with the runic alphabet. Its aims are surprisingly ambitious, but its means are surprisingly crude; ineradicably associated with primitive magic. Perhaps for this very reason the reaction was violent.

Nor is this a mere speculation. Mythology provides us with ample evidence that the pagans of Teutondom had become a reflective and inquiring race. Their later myths are charged with ideas which show that they had far surpassed the Homeric Greeks in civilisation. Thanks to their disappointments, they had recognised the insidious as well as the supernatural character of evil, and they had concluded that its type and representative was Loki. This enigmatic deity seems to have originated in very ancient times as a fire spirit, and then to have developed into the god that ends things whether good or bad. As such, one is tempted to detect some distant and rudimentary kinship with the Devil that appeared before the God of Job and even with the highly civilised Mephistophelean spirit *der stets verneint*<sup>1</sup>. At any rate Loki seems, at this intermediary stage of his progress, to have been the friend as well as the foe of the gods. He is sometimes represented as an Asa or the friend of Thor and Othin, or simply as a resourceful and mischievous god. If he does a bad turn he generally makes it good. But his character and reputation change hopelessly for the worse when he associates himself with the slaying of Balder. This brilliant and humane deity may once have been a spirit of light, the issue of Tiwaz, and late in the Viking period he appears, especially in Denmark, as the son of Othin and Frigg and as the wisest of the Asas, and he looks out on the world from the castle Broadlook (*Breidablik*)<sup>2</sup>. As he is of a mild, though warlike nature and is an upholder of honour and truth, all the other gods love him except Hoðr or Hotherus. The story of his murder with the *misteltein* (whether really the mistletoe or a sword so named), and of the failure to rescue him from the underworld, is told by Snorri and Saxo<sup>3</sup>. Sir James Frazer has argued, no doubt with reason, that the story of Balder's death is the counterpart to certain

<sup>1</sup> Goethe, *Faust*, I, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Grimnismöl*, xii.

<sup>3</sup> *Gylf*. xlix; *Gesta Danorum*, III, xxii<sup>b</sup>, p. 110—xxiiii<sup>a</sup>, p. 125.

“purification ceremonies.”<sup>1</sup> But the significance of a myth is not confined to its superstitious associations. The *Arc de triomphe* is no less a monument of Napoleonic ambition and of imperial architecture, because primitive armies passed under some superstructure to purge them of blood pollution. So in the case of Balder. The generations after the “Roman period” must have refashioned the legend to convey a moral peculiar to their age. By accepting and applauding the story with its emphasis on the virtue and the warlike qualities of the hero and on the ignominy of his death, they must have recognised that the principle of evil was insidious and all-pervading. Loki had a hand in the perpetration of this infamy, and as his character had always lent itself to such interpretation, he becomes in later *mythology*, the type of evil. In *Hyndluljóth*<sup>2</sup> we are told how Gerth’s mother Aurbotha, the wife of the giant Gymer, is burnt as a witch. But her heart is not destroyed by the flames. Now the heart, in primitive times, was so far regarded as the seat of life and personality that the characteristics of the dead being still lived in it, until it was destroyed. Savages eat the heart of their enemy in order to assimilate his ferocity or fleetness. So Loki finds the remains of the witch and swallows her heart, and becomes so possessed by the baneful woman’s nature, that he himself conceives and gives birth to the children from whom the trolls are descended. Saxo does not speak of Loki as a spirit. Under the name of Mithotyn, he describes him as a mortal. But just as Othin had invented white magic, so this miscreant acquires superhuman power through the black art—*prestigiis celeber, perinde ac celesti beneficio vegetatus*. Thus he becomes the god’s rival and at one time his supplanter. He is captured and slain, but his maleficent energy is too active and ingrained to leave his body in death, and a pestilence arises from his corpse. They break into his grave and (like many a warrior who sought to lay a ghost) they cut the head off the dead body and to make doubly sure, they pierce his heart<sup>3</sup>.

It will be remembered that earlier and ruder ages had also

<sup>1</sup> *Golden Bough*, pt vii, vols. i, ii, *Balder the Beautiful*.

<sup>2</sup> XXX—XLV.

<sup>3</sup> *Saxo*, i, viii<sup>a</sup>, p. 43.

found themselves confronted with evil, and had pictured their adversaries as monsters in bestial or even in human form<sup>1</sup>. We have seen that these terrifying visions arose, at least in some cases, out of the dangers and hardships which now and then drove tribes and races to seek new homes farther south or west. But Loki is an adversary of a different order. He is not so much a menace as an illustration. He represents the demoralisation and perversity of a more settled age. He is not an adversary who can be met and vanquished by strength or skill; his chief weapons are treachery and witchcraft; his influence is so subtle and pervasive that the stoutest may fall his victims. In other words, men had reached the stage in which they realise that there are two natures within them. Besides the type which reaches its consummation in Othin, there was the other tendency embodied in Loki. Nor need we suspect that this impression is conveyed by the Christian writers who have transmitted to us the relics of northern paganism. The Greeks had adopted the myth of Dionysos-Zagreus centuries before the teaching of Jesus was known<sup>2</sup>, and the Teutonic and Scandinavian races have shown themselves to be no less introspective. We have seen that the warrior caste had so far advanced beyond the ideas of primitive man, that they had pictured themselves enjoying after death a fuller and more sensuous life than that accorded to them on earth. So now we find that some class, whether warriors, peasants or poets, or all three mutually inspiring each other in this later phase, had succeeded in thinking out the doctrine of evil just as thoroughly. Loki became the counterpart of Othin in the next world as in this. Perhaps as the god that ends things, he had come to be associated with night and the dead season of winter, and was for that reason called Utgarth-loki or Ugarthilocus. At any rate, he was at one stage regarded as the type of the underworld. According to the story most universally received, all the gods turned against him after the murder of Balder and bound and thrust him into a pit. There he lay under the immortal displeasure of the other deities; and when once the idea had taken root that a spirit who typified

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, § 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Post*, chap. ix, § 1.

evil was also typifying its punishment, it was only too easy to imagine that other criminals would one day join him. In fact Hel became Loki's daughter by a giantess who also bore the wolf Fenris and a monstrous snake<sup>1</sup>. Possibly the gaping jaws of the medieval Hell are derived from this idea.

v. *The nature of man's soul; depth and complexity of the ideas on the subject. Man's ultimate prospects in this world and the next; incompleteness and pessimism of the outlook.*

At this stage of our inquiry we are baffled by endless confusions, inconsistencies, and omissions, possibly due to the defects and lateness of our surviving data. But however undecided the views on the *Askr Yggdrasill*, the whereabouts of *Asgarðr*, the prerogatives of Freyja appear to us, we can still visualise a wonderfully clear and inspiring conception of the soul and the spirit. According to *Voluspo*<sup>2</sup>, human nature was composed of earthly matter filled with animal vitality and the power to grow in obedience to hereditary tendencies. Then there was added by Lothur *litr goða*, another intangible body which shaped itself on the model of the divine image and gave the human being his individual appearance—the impression that his figure and personality make on other people. Then Höner gives to this growing body the gift of *óðr*, its mentality; the capacity to will, to think and to remember. According to *Fjolsvinnsmól*<sup>3</sup>, each child originates in fruit which ripens on the world tree and is impregnated with *óðr*. Lastly Othin bestows on the human organism *önd*, its spirit, by which a man is inspired to imitate the heroism, mercy, generosity and truthfulness of the gods. At death the earthly body, perhaps burnt to ashes, is buried under a burrow of earth, and the animal energies, which once caused it to grow and move, linger round the tomb and still retain their instinct for food and drink. Sometimes this lower vitality has been so deeply interpenetrated by the *óðr* and *önd*, that it retains the impress of these divine gifts, and the dead man's higher nature is still

<sup>1</sup> *Gylf.* xxxiv.

<sup>2</sup> xvii, xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Generally inserted with *Grougaldr* in *Svipdagasmól*. See stanzas xxxi and xxxii.

recognisable, hovering like a ghost above ground. But the more individual part of him, his *litr*, retaining his form, without the substance, described by Saxo as *simulacrum exsangue*, journeyed by subterranean ways to the kingdom of Hel, or Nifheim or Nifther.

These ideas are so striking, that one cannot help asking whence they are derived. Theories of similar import can be found among some of the most advanced thinkers of other ages and countries. Thus Plutarch believed that man's nature, like the Universe of which it is a part, was composed of three elements. First there was the spiritual and intelligent, endowed with reason to rule the microcosm as God ruled the macrocosm. Then there was the brutal and sensual element which became unruly if left to itself and which could be subdivided into the corporal or vegetative and the irascible or concupiscent<sup>1</sup>. Marcus Aurelius divided the human system into body, soul and mind<sup>2</sup>, and Dante was ready to occupy part of his pilgrimage in learning from Statius how the soul is distinct from, but associated with the immaterial powers of memory, intelligence and will<sup>3</sup>. These doctrines were quite deep enough for the Renaissance, especially after Amyot's translation of the so-called *Moralia*. They are expounded by Castiglione in *Il Cortegiano*<sup>4</sup> and they are alluded to even by Marston<sup>5</sup>. The ultimate source for these humanists, both classical and medieval, was probably the *De Generatione* of Aristotle, which survived, during the Middle Ages, in Latin and Arabic versions. Thomas Aquinas had fully expounded the doctrine<sup>6</sup> and he had been closely studied by Dante. Are we to suppose that Icelandic and Norwegian poets had derived their philosophy from the same fountain head? It is at least possible. Perhaps some early skald may have had the opportunity to gather such ideas from the disciples of Aldhelm, Bede or Lanfranc. Perhaps some northern poet may have handled Alcuin's *De Anima ratione* founded on the teaching of Aristotle as transmitted by St Augustin. The *Voluspó* has probably

<sup>1</sup> *Moralia*.

<sup>2</sup> III, 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Purg.* xxv.

<sup>4</sup> IV.

<sup>5</sup> *Antonio and Mellida*, pt i, Act iv, ll. 13 ff.

<sup>6</sup> *Summa Theologica*, p. 1, qu. cxviii, cxix. Cf. *post*, p. 208.

undergone the influence of Christianity, even though *Svipdagsmól* is likely to be purely pagan. On the other hand, we find that the multiple soul was also a very primitive belief<sup>1</sup>. The ancient Greeks and Indians held that when a man allowed his reflection to fall on the surface of a pool, he was exposing one of his souls to be dragged under by the water sprite. The Caribs, as well as Plato<sup>2</sup>, supposed that different souls were lodged in different parts of the body. Besides it is to be noticed that the psychology expounded in the *Eddas* is not identical with but only similar to the teaching of Aristotle, Plutarch, Thomas Aquinas, and Dante. So it seems just as likely that northern and southern Europe were aiming independently at a philosophical explanation of the same mystery, perhaps helping and confirming each other on the way, or perhaps reaching the same conclusion by quite separate paths. In either case these theories must have been retained and developed from primitive beliefs in order to explain the power of the human being after death. As we have already seen, and shall see again<sup>3</sup>, the soul was supposed to be utterly severed from the body and to vanish to the bourn from which no traveller returns. And yet from the days of Odysseus to Hamlet, men could not keep from themselves the conviction that the spirit of a dead man might never be far from the place of his burial or the scene of his earthly activities. All civilisations had sooner or later to reconcile these beliefs and then look beyond. The significance of their solution lies not in its source, but in the intelligence needed to grasp their ideas, and in the motives which impelled such efforts of thought. So it is instructive to note that *Voluspó* and *Svipdagsmól* hint at theories appreciated at the sunset of classical paganism and the dawn of the Renaissance.

In some respects their eschatology is not unworthy of their psychology. The fate of the *litr* depended on the way that it had on the one hand controlled the animal instincts of the body and on the other hand had obeyed the impulses of the *þór*

<sup>1</sup> See Frazer, *Golden Bough*, pt II, *Taboo and the Perils of the Soul*, chap. II, § 3; *Balder the Beautiful*, vol. II, chap. XI.

<sup>2</sup> *Tim.* 69 c-72 d.

<sup>3</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. VII; *post*, chap. XI.

and *önd*. It seems that another body, adapted to this underworld, was attached by magic runes to the spirit; and thus again equipped with the capacity for joy or suffering, it passed to Valhal or to Niflher. But when we come to inquire what destiny awaited the spirit in its last adventure, one is surprised at the inadequacy and uncertainty of the prospect<sup>1</sup>. We have noticed that at some quite early period the Norse peoples, in common with other races, must have believed in the mortality of their gods. They seem to have returned to the doctrine as soon as they outgrew their rather childish conception of the next world. Whether or no inspired by Christian teaching, they elaborated the idea of Ragna Rok. According to *Voluspó*<sup>2</sup>, this was the end of the world. The first sign of the *débâcle* was the trembling of the world tree Yggdrasill and the escape of a fettered giant. Then the wolves of the sun and the moon and the monsters from Jotunhcim would begin to work havoc with the universe and the champions of Asgarth and of Hel's kingdom would rise to do battle with them. The gods would conquer and would slay the giants but would perish themselves, and meanwhile the inhabitants of this earth would kill each other. Such was the story in which the northern "Age of Despair" expressed its pessimism.

But we have already noticed, and we shall notice again and again throughout this inquiry, that mankind seldom or never accepts a depressing doctrine without providing itself with some escape or palliative. In this case a new and disillusioned age could hardly refuse to expect an ending of the old and corrupt order of things, when once they had accepted their forefathers' doctrine that Thrudgelmer had begotten the younger frost giants and that Heid (*Heidr*) had brought sickness and death on earth. Besides, the catastrophe offered the one hope for the ultimate regeneration of mankind. So it was imagined that Hoddmimer hid Lif and Lifþrasir in Yggdrasill and nourished them with morning dew, and from these two sprang a new race to inhabit a new earth. Other

<sup>1</sup> *Post*, chap. xi, § 2.

<sup>2</sup> XLIII–LVII. Of course the event has often been described and discussed; nowhere better than by W. P. Ker, *The Dark Ages*.

early humanists seem to have turned old stories of buried treasure and imprisoned giants into the legend of Odinsacre (*Odainsakr*). This was a mysterious region in Hades, separated from the place of punishments by a bridged stream, and hard but not impossible of access to human beings. Mortals, if helped by the gods and themselves greatly daring, might undertake the journey through arctic cold and darkness and would then find themselves in sunny meadows carpeted with flowers or covered with a golden glitter. Here they would meet a race of mortals who had not yet died, or become sullied by life on earth, the Asmegir who were being reserved, as Rydberg<sup>1</sup> has proved, to repeople the earth after the downfall.

So we conclude this attempt to comprise within a few pages the imaginative history of an international civilisation. Of course such a hurried and compendious review is bound, in many details, to be misleading. But one feature is surely unmistakeable: the gloomy prospect which must have confronted any latter-day pagan. A warrior or thinker of those days had too many supernatural enemies wherewith to contend. From the coming of the frost giants to the discovery of Nifher and the expectation of Ragna Rok, a mortal must have been well-nigh overwhelmed if he thought of the world just beyond his daily experience. We shall see later the bearing of these conclusions not only on the understanding of *Beowulf*, but also on the understanding of Christian influences. Let us first consider the types of heroes who accompanied and expressed these stages of pagan evolution.

vi. *Tales of adventure keep pace with the progress of religious sentiments. Tales of monstrous giants are followed by those of adventurous gods; then come stories of mortals who achieve self-realisation by acts of sheer bloodshed and violence. Then craft and running are introduced, and finally the control of magic.*

It has often been noticed in the actual world of beings of flesh and blood that individuals exist side by side who are really centuries apart in growth and capabilities. In fact the more or less steady progress of the human race has been put

<sup>1</sup> §§ 52-5.

down to the occasional emergence of some individual who far surpasses his contemporaries in the development of certain faculties, and hands on this heightened efficiency to his successors. As one generation follows another the more highly developed race multiplies and its ascendancy becomes assured, but the backward ones are slow to give ground and their inferiority is not universally recognised until their supplacers have grown more numerous than they. To the last, the older type keeps for itself a place in the world and a sphere of influence. Such is also the evolution of personalities in the other world of art and imagination. It must be remembered that the chief characters of a poem are not merely the figments of one poet's brain. They gradually acquire an existence quite distinct if not different from what their creator originally intended. They have, in fact, become endowed with a life just as actual and as real as that of historical personages, though of a different order. The poet who thinks that he is evolving these figures out of his inner consciousness is really allowing the opinions and aspirations and sentiments of his contemporaries to supply most of the traits. A great character exists objectively in the same sense as an age or an epoch exists. It is as real as the thoughts and wishes which it embodies or evokes. And just as any community is made up of many tendencies, some aiming towards a higher and purer life and others drifting backwards or clinging passively to a coarser retrogressive age, so several types of heroes, apparently antagonised in spirit and ideal, may be cultivated by the same age, and be all more or less equally applauded. And just as the different individuals of a community conform to the same customs and cultivate the same manners and dress, though widely separated by the stages of development, so the characters which they severally admire, and which appear to belong to the same epoch, are often representative of widely different stages of development.

In the first place we find that tales of monstrous giants—no doubt reminiscent of the *Urdummheit* of primitive peoples—were preserved till long after the Christian era began. Such is the romance of Thor told by the skald Eilífr Guðrúnarson

in the tenth century. Loki persuades Thor to come to Jotunheim unarmed. The adventurer, on his journey thither, is entertained by Grið, the mother of the Asa Viðar, and she strengthens his heart as well as his hand by entrusting him with the might-giving girdle, the iron gauntlet and the magic staff. Armed with these, Thor continues his way and plunges into the furious river Vinur, in which he is nearly drowned thanks to the agency of a witch. After he has overcome this trial, he reaches Geirrøð's hall and crushes his enemy's two daughters who were plotting his death. Lastly he takes his seat opposite Geirrøð himself, who had from the first resolved to kill him and had suborned Loki to send the invitation from Jotunheim. The treacherous host suddenly flings his spear at him, but the missile is caught in his mailed fist and returned against the intending murderer with deadly effect.

Such crudities, ~~superstition~~ of "a kind of vacant hugeness, a large awkward gianthood,"<sup>1</sup> were no doubt preserved among peasants and children. It has even been suggested that this legend and others like it originated among country folk as a kind of fertility drama, and that traces of its primitive half-ritualistic character are still preserved in the visit of the stranger and the act of killing<sup>2</sup>. If so, the story soon lost its early associations. As we have them, such fables, with all their unsophisticated exaggerations, have been recounted and remembered because men were admiring superhuman feats of strength and daring. They are the product of an age of warfare, when courage and violence are valued more than anything else and are, so to speak, apotheosised if connected with a deity. The next step was to raise their own species to this level. As Jordanes said of the Goths: "magna potiti per loca victoria, iam proceressuos quasi qui fortuna vincebant non puros homines sed semideos, id est anses vocavere."<sup>3</sup> In fact poets seem to have grown accustomed to confuse men with gods and to believe that the mortal was sufficiently perfect and unassailable to join issue with the immortal. The story of how the Norwegian adventurer Gunnarr Helmingr wrestled with the

<sup>1</sup> Carlyle, *Hero-worship*, Lecture 1.

<sup>2</sup> See B. S. Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda*.

<sup>3</sup> *Hist. Goth.* chap. xiii.

old pastoral god Frey and overthrew him, may refer to some such time<sup>1</sup>. Another such type is Biarki whose character has been so brilliantly analysed by Olrik<sup>2</sup>. He is enormously strong, insensible to the gentler feelings, a stranger to love. His most formidable opponent is Agnar Ingialdson who is slain only because his sword breaks and whose hardihood is such that he dies laughing. Biarki surpasses him, because when Leire is burnt and Hrolf his king slain he actually looks around for the god Othin and threatens him with death<sup>3</sup>. Another warrior of this type is Ole the Norwegian. Before he was fifteen years old he could frighten tried warriors by his piercing gaze (*vibrante lumen acritate*). When he penetrated Gunn's fastness at Eyda-skog, he slew his first opponent by breaking one limb after another, and then mortally wounded both the robber chief and his son, who attacked him simultaneously<sup>4</sup>.

Many great heroes belong to this period. Amongst them we must put Walter of Aquitaine, whose story has more than once been retold in modern literature<sup>5</sup>. It will be remembered that this warrior and Hildegund, whom he loved, were hostages at the court of Attila and that both made their escape when the Franks refused payment to the Huns, but not empty handed, for they brought with them a load of treasure. This stolen wealth was their undoing, for Gunther the king of the Franks soon learnt from Hagen, Walter's former companion in captivity, how the two were crossing the Rhine, and he followed after them with twelve warriors to win for himself the booty which they had purloined. The Latin poet, who composed the only complete version now extant<sup>6</sup>, wished, no doubt, to dwell on the avarice which brought disaster upon them all; but the real inspiration of the narrative arises from the epic qualities

<sup>1</sup> In Saga of Olaf Tryggvason. Story retold, in a different connection, by Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation*, chap. x.

<sup>2</sup> *Danmarks Heltedigtning*, chap. II.

<sup>3</sup> The Biarkamöl as recorded by Saxo, II, xvii<sup>b</sup>, p. 90, and reconstructed by Olrik, *op. cit.* chap. II.

<sup>4</sup> Saxo, VII, lxxiii<sup>b</sup>, p. 368.

<sup>5</sup> T. Wright, *History of Domestic Manners and Sentiments*. W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance*, chap. II, § 2. H. M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age*, chap. I.

<sup>6</sup> *Waltharius*, O.E. version *Waldere* survives in two short fragments only.

of the Frankish hero. And yet one feels that after all these are the virtues of freebooters. Their warlike ambitions are surprisingly narrow. Their spirit finds its full satisfaction in facing the utmost danger, but only from those who seek to rob them of their wealth, however gotten. Whatever may have been the sentiments and susceptibilities of the first (probably Christian) audiences or readers for whom this poem was composed in its Latin form, the original characters of the *Waltharius* are more primitive than those of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* and far more so than those of *Beowulf*.

The contrast between the older and the newer types of hero is well brought out in the story of Biorn and Fridleif<sup>1</sup>. Twelve Norwegian brothers make a raid on Sweden and fortify themselves on an island. They lay waste the neighbourhood with fire and sword, yet the chronicler does not treat them as murderers or scoundrels. They are warriors of the olden time; men of valour and of splendid bodily presence; renowned for victories over giants and rich with the trophies of conquered nations. Biorn, the head of the family, was further celebrated for the possession of a horse so swift and powerful that it could cross the most furious mountain torrent, and of a monstrous dog which had killed twelve men. Yet despite these advantages, the terrible invaders are destined to be vanquished by a hero of finer quality. Halfdan, the king of Sweden, implores the help of Fridleif the Russian, and this warrior, though no less daring and self-reliant than Beowulf, sets about his enterprise in a spirit of cunning and craftiness. His main difficulty was to assure himself of his comrades' support in an attack, so, having succeeded in capturing Biorn's celebrated horse, he started out that night, accompanied by one follower only. When the two reached the furious torrent which defended the approach to the marauders' stronghold, Fridleif battered his companion to death, and then, having dressed the corpse in his own royal raiment, and having wounded the riderless horse, he turned the animal loose to find its way back to the *comitatus*. He himself crossed the foaming river on Biorn's peerless steed, and being clad in his attendant's humble garb,

<sup>1</sup> *Saxo*, vi, lii<sup>a</sup>, p. 259.

he entered the enemies' castle unnoticed. Meanwhile his followers, discovering first the wounded horse and then the bruised unrecognisable corpse, wearing the chieftain's clothes, were filled with fury at his supposed death and, while it was still night, they poured out to take vengeance on the Norwegians. Biorn and his brothers left the carouse to meet this attack, little knowing that the most formidable of their assailants was already in their midst, and while their attention was directed to the mainland, Fridleif let down the drawbridge and, now sure of his comrades' succour, he started the slaughter. Even in Saxo's unpoetical and abbreviated account, the story has all the elements of a pagan epic. It will be noticed that the hero is, like Beowulf, a stranger who has travelled from a distant land to accomplish a service for another and that though his adversaries have not about them the terror of the supernatural, yet their conqueror shows the same kind of superb self-reliance in penetrating like Beowulf alone into their unexplored stronghold, and besides needed to exercise far more cunning. Fridleif has another attribute. This champion and rescuer of others is so intent on victory, and so sure of the justice and wisdom of his course, that he does not hesitate treacherously to murder one of his own men in order to effect his stratagem.

This ideal of old-fashioned battle strength blended with opportunism amounting to treachery, is well brought out in the story which Widukind of Corvei tells of Iring. When Irmfried, king of the Thuringians, was hard pressed by Dieterich, king of the Franks, he called in the Saxons, and then, as his allies proved too strong for him, he tried to betray them to the invader. The Saxons turned against their betrayers and slew them all, except Irmfried himself, who escaped but was later enticed to the Frankish camp and made captive. As the Thuringian knelt in front of Dieterich, Iring, once his counsellor but now the thegn of the Frankish ruler, was standing by his lord's chair. Suddenly he drew his sword and slew his former master. Dieterich in horror pronounced the sentence of summary banishment. But we are not expected to share the monarch's disgust. On the contrary we are to

learn that Iring, now released from his allegiance, suddenly turns on Dieterich, runs him through the body, and then cuts his way to freedom through the armed courtiers<sup>1</sup>.

It will be noticed that the exploits of Walter, Biorn, Fridleif and Iring take place in a narrower world of feuds and local raids. It looks as though the great age of conquest was over and that the warrior castes were settling down to the more complex and less heroic tasks of holding or adding to what their fathers had won.

So the purely brutal and ruthless warrior begins to be held in abhorrence. It is true that a king or earl at death was supposed to take his wealth away with him to the howe, leaving only the land which his sons would not be rich enough to maintain, unless they flung themselves into war<sup>2</sup>. Yet the mere man of blood was discredited. His ferocity is exaggerated and his recklessness brings him to disaster. Such is the fate of Hardbeen<sup>3</sup>, the ravisher of princesses, whose outbursts were as primitive and gigantesque as anything in *Kulhwck*. Or Snoekoll the berserker<sup>4</sup>, who used to roar aloud and bite the rim of his shield. Or Biorn the Black who went from place to place all over Norway taking by force any wife or daughter who pleased him<sup>5</sup>. So we hear much of the outrageous cruelty of Røtho, *Ratenorum pirata*<sup>6</sup>, and of Jarmerik, the son of Gotar<sup>7</sup>, though the story of his treasure chamber<sup>8</sup> and of his romantic escape from the Slavonic court would have monopolised the attention of a more primitive age. Ole himself, though possessed by the savage instincts of a primitive age, yet survives as a less discredited character because he formed a *comitatus*. He gathered round himself the most turbulent and unregenerate spirits—*effrenati ingenii iuvenes claritatis cupidine concitatos*—and became recognised as a state within the state; the bulwark of society against robbers and oppressors<sup>9</sup>.

Such was indeed the only solution for this age of transition. The real turning point in Grettir's career came when Olaf the

<sup>1</sup> Retold by Grimm, *Teut. Myth.* chap. xv.

<sup>2</sup> *Vatzdælasaga*, I, I.

<sup>3</sup> *Saxo*, vii, lxvi<sup>a</sup>, p. 327.

<sup>4</sup> *Grettissaga*, XL.

<sup>5</sup> *Saga Gisla*, I.

<sup>6</sup> *Saxo*, vii, lxxii<sup>a</sup>, p. 353.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* viii, lxxxiii<sup>a</sup>, p. 408.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* viii, lxxxiii<sup>b</sup>, p. 412.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* vii, lxxvi<sup>a</sup>, p. 373.

Saint, king of Norway, who accepted Thorleik Eyjolfson<sup>1</sup> and Bolli<sup>2</sup>, refused to include Grettir<sup>3</sup> in his *comitatus*. For men of that stamp the settled countryside was too confined. The mighty Hrapp<sup>4</sup> had to flee his native country because he was so overbearing. Swan<sup>5</sup> became an outcast for the same reason. Thorkel Foulmouth<sup>6</sup> had much the same record as had Beowulf. In fact he once confronted and slew a *finngálka* such as Grendel was. Yet he dwelt apart and was humiliated by Skarphedinn, because he could not govern his tongue. In the Heroic Age men were glad to eat the flesh of wild animals, so as to absorb their qualities. But now when Ord<sup>7</sup> finds his father and his brother slain by a bear and kills and eats it, he becomes wicked and ill to deal with. But the classic example is Grettir himself. His story is told without malice and without favour. He does many good deeds<sup>8</sup>. He is a great conqueror of unlaid ghosts and trolls<sup>9</sup>. But he is too dangerous for his age and his country. His strength and quarrelsomeness are too well known. He is marked down as a man of ill-luck. Thord said the same of Thorolf<sup>10</sup>, Gunnar of Sigmund<sup>11</sup>, and Odd of Thorarin<sup>12</sup>. Men had lost their epic trust in the protection of Fate<sup>13</sup>. As is pronounced in *Holmverja Saga*; *eigi má skauponom remna*<sup>14</sup>; a man's destiny was now a burden from which the victim could not escape. It could even be incorporated in a curse and laid on a man by his enemy. Thus the thrall Kol is able to blight Gisli<sup>15</sup>. But generally it is some troll or evil spirit who is able to wreck the human being by pronouncing his doom.

We have now reached a most interesting period, when the dread of witchcraft and devilry, of the *mirandae prestigiorum machinationes*, became almost a nightmare. Probably the early Christian preachers added enormously to these superstitions by explaining that the heathen gods were only magicians and by advocating the religion which claimed to be a pro-

<sup>1</sup> *Laxd.* LXX.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* LXXXIII.

<sup>3</sup> *Grettissaga*, XXXIX.

<sup>4</sup> *Laxd.* x.

<sup>5</sup> *Njalssaga*, x.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* CXVIII.

<sup>7</sup> *Landnáma-bóc*, III, 22, 4.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. *Grettissaga*, xix.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* XXXIII-V; LXIV-VI.

<sup>10</sup> *Laxd.* XIV.

<sup>11</sup> *Njal.* XLIV.

<sup>12</sup> *Eyrbyggja Saga*, xviii.

<sup>13</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. III, § 2.

<sup>14</sup> XIV, 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Gisl.* I.

tection against their spells. Who were Grettir's two greatest enemies? One was a surly foul-mouthed shepherd, who goes out on Yule-eve to tend his sheep without observing the fast; is murdered by an evil spirit; and haunts Thorhall's homestead. Grettir lays the ghost after a tremendous struggle and is rewarded by the farmer, who also gives thanks to God. Yet this troll is able to curse Grettir<sup>1</sup>, to cause his strength never to increase, to fill him with the terror of darkness, and to prophesy that all his deeds shall be bloody and end in outlawry. So we see him many years afterwards, with the faithful Illugi at Drangey. Here he encounters the second adversary who was too strong for him—the old hag, Thorbiorn's foster-mother, who again curses him and cuts runes on a tree trunk which she stains with her blood, and so does him to death<sup>2</sup>.

Fear of the spirit world and of those who can control it—the *mathematicorum genus*—is not confined to the agricultural life of the Icelandic sagas. We meet frequently the belief that magicians could blunt the edge of swords with the glance of their eyes. Thus Hildiger, the son of Gunnar, was *hebetandi carminibus ferri peritus*<sup>3</sup>. The freebooter Wisin<sup>4</sup>, who terrorised the Russian countryside round his stronghold at Ana-fial, could do the same to all who withstood him. Harald I was gifted by Othin with a hide which no weapon could pierce<sup>5</sup>; a berserker was generally believed to enjoy the same advantage; the followers of the great conqueror, Harald Fairhair, were even called “the Wolf Coats,” because no weapon seemed to bite into their armour<sup>6</sup>. For the same reason, when Halfdan II, king of Denmark, attacked Hakon, he discarded his sword and armed himself with a huge club, studded with iron<sup>7</sup>. The warriors of these days had to be prepared to encounter more dangerous and diabolical qualities than invulnerability. Odd the Rover<sup>8</sup>, *vir magice doctus*, could range over the sea without a ship and could even raise tempests by his spells. Arngrim the Swede, to please his Danish neighbours, attacked the Finns<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Grettissaga*, xxxv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* lxxx, lxxxii.

<sup>3</sup> *Saxo*, vii, lxxii<sup>b</sup>, p. 356.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* vi, lvi<sup>a</sup>, p. 280.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* vii, lxxiiii<sup>b</sup>, p. 361.

<sup>6</sup> *Vatzdæla*, ix.

<sup>7</sup> *Saxo*, viii, lxv<sup>a</sup>, p. 323.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* v, xxxix<sup>a</sup>, p. 192.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* v, l<sup>a</sup>, p. 248.

As soon as the invaders charged, the defenders broke and fled, but cast behind them three pebbles, and lo! the pursuers were bewitched into believing that they saw three impassable mountains. Next day the battle was renewed and this time the Finns sprinkled snow on the ground, and behold the Swedes saw a stretch of foaming water. Witolf, the famous leech of Helsingland, once gave shelter to Halfdan II when Erik's soldiers surrounded the house, demanding the fugitive's surrender; he shrouded them in mist—*adeo lumenum usum nubilus quidam error obtuderat*<sup>1</sup>. Gudrun did as much for the discomfiture of the besieged Danes when Jarmerik was defending himself against an invasion of the Hellespontines. But Othin appeared, restored to them their sight, and taught them how to overwhelm their enemies with showers of stones<sup>2</sup>.

If the fabled heroes and ancestors of a race have so much to hope and fear from the mysterious powers of magic, we may be sure that life is felt to be inexplicable and human effort incalculable. Mythology is nearly always an effort to visualise the difficulties and perplexities of existence and so there arise these elaborate beliefs in the black and the white arts. Mythology is also an effort to visualise the means of overcoming these perplexities, and we must now ask whether a new type of hero was evolved, who could prove himself a match for the problems of a later age. We think at first of Saxo's portraits of Thorny, Thorwing, Tatar and Hialte<sup>3</sup>. Their bodies are magnificently armed for war; their native courage has been tried and trained by experience; their huge stature and their strength are worthy of their courage; besides the old-fashioned power of wielding the sword, they have the skill to handle the bow and the catapult; in addition to these warlike virtues they have ready wits and the gift of song. The sons of Shelty must have been of this stamp. When they entered the Torsk-frith-moot most men thought that the "Anses" were come among them<sup>4</sup>. Or again Kjartan, the son of Olaf, who surpassed others in beauty, strength, skill and even craftsmanship, and

<sup>1</sup> *Saxo*, vii, lxv<sup>b</sup>, p. 324.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* viii, lxxvi<sup>b</sup>, pp. 377 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* viii, lxxxiiii<sup>a</sup>, p. 414.

<sup>4</sup> *Landnáma-bók*, iii, 10, 2.

was yet so gentle that every child loved him<sup>1</sup>. Yet all these accomplishments pale before the character of Siegfried. This hero seems to have originated among the Franks on the Rhine, and to have been discarded by them when they began to idealise Charlemagne as the type of the national Christian hero. But as there was commerce between the Franks of North-west Germany and the Norwegians, the story may have found its way north as early as the seventh century<sup>2</sup>. Kriemhild becomes Guthrun, Brynhild becomes a Valkyrie, Sifrit becomes Sigurth; and the episodes of his life are brought more closely into touch with the gods. In *Gripisspó*<sup>3</sup> Sigurth's ideal qualities are developed. He is invincible, fearless, generous in gold-giving, famous, handsome and wise in speech. Surely the hero's character is now perfect? Not in the later stages of paganism. The Valkyrie teaches him runes and gives him knowledge of all men's tongues<sup>4</sup>. Another hero who fulfils this ideal is Erik the king of Sweden, known of as "shrewd spoken" (*hinn malspáki*). When a mess impregnated with serpents' spittle is prepared by their mother, Erik succeeds in consuming his brother's share as well as his own, and so becomes master of all wisdom. He spins riddles, triumphs in word combats, and proves more than an equal for wizards such as Odd and Grep. Yet he is none the less a stout warrior both on land and sea<sup>5</sup>. Another hero of this type is Hrut, who, as Gunnhild declared, was a match in strength for the best man in Norway, but surpassed them all in wisdom<sup>6</sup>.

The more we read stories which seem to be created out of less ancient material, the more we find dissatisfaction with the older epic ideal of courage and confidence, and a growing admiration for intelligence. We seem to be traversing the same phase of civilisation as that which lies between Hesiod and Herodotus<sup>7</sup>, or perhaps the stage marked by the story how

<sup>1</sup> *Laxdæla*, xxviii.

<sup>2</sup> For résumé of argument see H. A. Bellows, *Poetic Edda*, pp. 337 ff. For full discussion of origin and development of the legend see Panzer, *Studien zur Germ. Sagengeschichte*, II, *Sigfrid*, 1912.

<sup>3</sup> vii.

<sup>5</sup> *Saxo*, v, xxxviii<sup>b</sup>, p. 190.

<sup>7</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. vi, §§ 3-7.

<sup>4</sup> *Grip.* xvii; *Sigrdrifumól*, v-xii.

<sup>6</sup> *Laxdæla*, xix.

the impetuous and arrogant Gens Fabia was outwitted and annihilated by the Veientians<sup>1</sup>. Sometimes we recognise the more modern ideal by a touch here and there as when Gizur vanquishes Gunnar by suddenly thinking of the ropes which enable him to pull the roof off the house<sup>2</sup>. Or when Fridleif, king of Denmark, slays the monster with the scaly hide by studying its habits and discovering how he can gain access to its only vulnerable part<sup>3</sup>. Or when Halldor receives Thorstein and Thorkell who come to bargain for his land, and he prepares for the violence which they intend to offer<sup>4</sup>. Njal himself is one of this order. He is gentle, generous, a great lawyer, and gifted with fore-knowledge<sup>5</sup>. It was his wisdom, seconded by Gunnar's compliance, which staved off, though it could not ultimately avert, the disaster which engulfed their houses. The men of this phase show many qualities suggestive of Christianity. For instance Olver Barna-karl, though a great warrior, would not allow children to be tossed on the spear points<sup>6</sup>. Yet Christianity is not an integral part of their lives. In fact Ospak, though unrivalled for wisdom, remained unconverted<sup>7</sup>. Some of the wisest excelled in that art in which pagans have always equalled if they have not surpassed Christians—the interpretation of dreams. As in the Dorian age, so in the age of Icelandic colonisation, dreams resemble oracles or riddles<sup>8</sup>. The intellectual hero often proved his worth by discovering their significance. Such was the service rendered by Gest Oddleifson, a man so wise and far-seeing that the greatest and wealthiest came to seek his counsel. He unravelled Gudrun's dream<sup>9</sup>. Gudrun herself was unsurpassed in wit and subtlety<sup>10</sup>, and she alone found the real explanation of Thorkell's puzzling dream<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Livy, I, 50.

<sup>2</sup> *Njal.* LXXVI.

<sup>3</sup> Saxo, VI, liiiib, p. 270.

<sup>4</sup> *Laxd.* LXXV.

<sup>5</sup> *Njal.* xx.

<sup>6</sup> *Landnáma-bók*, V, 13, I.

<sup>7</sup> *Laxd.* XLV.

<sup>8</sup> *E.g. Laxd.* XXXI.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* XXXIII.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* XXXIV, XXXIX.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* LXXIV.

vii. *There is still another type to be considered: the characters, such as Sigrid or Starkad, who have lost the joyous self-sufficiency of the Heroic Age and yet show an indifference to the unseen world and a tendency to despise the pleasures and pains of this one. The significance of disguises.*

We have already noticed that characters representative of different phases of development jostle each other in the same legends. This conflict of tendencies is particularly true of the later stories which we have just discussed, and which have come down to us through narrators imbued with Christianity. We have the ever-spreading and deepening background of magic, out of which human beings come to the front armed with supernatural powers, either kings possessed of enchanted weapons or churls endowed with the knowledge how to curse, or again men who have died in sin and have become trolls. At about the same time we seem to recognise the handsome, courteous and skilled hero, the product of a well-developed society, himself often blessed with magic properties and perhaps gifted with more than human wisdom. And then, lastly, we have some portraits of the post-epic character, the man of intellect and insight, who foresees his own and his friends' true interests, and triumphs by cunning rather than by strength and skill. Have we now considered the best that this early civilisation could produce? Perhaps. But there is still another type of hero to be considered. He is a man who remains independent of the gods or of magic. We have seen that the Icelandic sagas knew of this type; but they were men engaged in the practical and prosaic enterprises connected with colonisation, or else involved in some not too heroic blood feud. Saxo tells of another kind of adventurer. He is a man who engages in the most varied exploits, some reminiscent of the earliest legends, others suggestive of the Middle Ages, and he seems to be robbed of supernatural aid. He does not rely on any power but his own; yet he has lost the glorious self-sufficiency of the Heroic Age. He seems to be labouring under some self-imposed obligation, to be spiritually crippled by the lack of some ideal, or perhaps it is the narrator who feels

obliged to tell the story in a new way. Tales of this class sometimes deal with self-restraint and extol the zeal with which both men and women cultivated the suppression of their own emotions and passions. Sigrid, the daughter of Siwald I, the king of Denmark, was of such peerless modesty (*adeo spectate pudicie*) that she could trust herself never to raise her eyes to look at a suitor, however charming or insistent. She even begged her husband to find the most irresistible wooers, so that she might prove her chastity<sup>1</sup>. When Siward heard news of the death of his father, Ragnar Lodbrog, he plunged a spear into his foot, so that the bodily pain might lessen his grief<sup>2</sup>. Cnut, the son of Gorm, besieged Dublin and was treacherously shot while watching some games in a wood near the city. Yet, though mortally wounded, he simply ordered the sports to continue and maintained an unmoved countenance till death, lest his enemies should know their success and be filled with courage<sup>3</sup>. Both Gunnar and Skarphedinn meet the utmost pains of death with heroic self-restraint<sup>4</sup>.

We find what is perhaps an even more advanced and modern type in the character of Starkad, the son of Storwerk. This hero was wrecked off the coast of Denmark and was added to the *comitatus* of Frotho IV *ob incredibilem corporis animique prestanciam*. In truth he seems to have been the most magnificent hero of the Germanic race. His fame spread from Denmark to Sweden and Saxony, and in the earlier versions of his story he is represented as a descendant of the giants, born with six hands and endowed with three times the usual span of mortal life<sup>5</sup>. Yet these supernatural gifts bring him little happiness. In Saxo's history he becomes a hero born out of due time, a vagrant with something of an eremite's contempt of opulence and good cheer, a champion in disguise who submits to obloquy and humiliation among a generation which neither knows him nor practises his virtues. He seems to be the type of man who, despite his magnificent powers, is driven back on himself for consolation and encouragement.

Space does not admit a full review of Starkad's career, but

<sup>1</sup> *Saxo*, vii, lxvi<sup>b</sup>, p. 330.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* ix, xciii<sup>a</sup>, p. 462.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* ix, xcvi<sup>a</sup>, p. 472.

<sup>4</sup> *Njal.* cxxxii.

<sup>5</sup> *Saxo*, vi, lv<sup>a</sup>, p. 274.

two episodes are too characteristic to be omitted. When Helge the Norwegian courted Helga, Ingild's sister, he found that Anganty, the Zealander, backed by his eight brothers, was his rival. So he invoked the help of Starkad who came on his wedding day, when the snow was falling fast, and though exposed to the full fury of the storm, he slew the nine of them single-handed. In this struggle he was dangerously wounded in seventeen places and could hardly crawl to a rock against which he propped his mangled body. Various characters passed by and offered him their help, and this episode is made into a kind of review and allegory of the different classes. A bailiff's offers were spurned with the utmost contempt, because of his sycophantic occupation, so was another who confessed that he did peasant service to a landowner in order to marry his slave. A handmaid, whose task was grinding at the mill, was also refused because one of such humble degree is better employed in suckling her own children. Finally he accepts the services of a young farm labourer, because a tiller of the soil lives honourably by his own work and enjoys a middle state equally removed from poverty and extravagance. So he returns to Helge's court, like Lancelot, in a cart<sup>1</sup>. Before long he hears of another wrong to be righted. Frotho IV of Denmark had been murdered, but his degenerate son Ingild shrank even from the sacred duty of revenge, so Starkad sets out for the Danish Court. He arrives disguised as a charcoal burner, in mean tattered raiment, covered with mud, and, true to his sense of inward worth, he takes his seat in the mead hall among the chieftains. The queen entered and angrily ordered this presumptuous beggar (as she thought) to quit the seats of the nobles and to betake himself to the places reserved for the commonfolk. The old man submitted to this contumely. Soon afterwards Ingild returned from hunting and discovered what a famous guest had honoured his palace, under the guise of poverty. Starkad was now preferred to the highest place, but he did not therefore spare the vices of his host. He showed the most scathing contempt for the luxury and extravagance of the entertainment which he was receiving and he bitterly

<sup>1</sup> *Saxo*, vi, lviii<sup>b</sup>, p. 291.

lampooned the king for offering hospitality to the sons of Swerting, who had murdered his father Frotho. So Ingild was at last induced to slaughter them at the banquet<sup>1</sup>.

Readers of Saxo will notice that Starkad appears frequently in disguise, and indeed that all through the *Gesta Danorum*, heroes and gods masquerade under feigned names and characters. Miss Phillpotts has already commented on this feature<sup>2</sup>, and has argued that the idea arose out of primitive drama. A figure covered with skins or leaves was frequently introduced to symbolise the spirit of fertility<sup>3</sup>, and so the tradition grew and was adapted to the later heroic tales. Some such explanation is needed to account for a few of the appearances, as when Gram strides into Gothland clothed in the skins of beasts so as to frighten the inhabitants<sup>4</sup>. But in most instances, the disguise proves to be not a reminiscence but the substance of the story, the most significant thing in the adventure, the symbol of its tone and sentiment. Every age has its own sense of mystery or of unexpectedness, and the character who asserts himself by belying his own nature becomes the expression of a certain kind of romanticism. So whatever the origin of the *motif*, we can often use it as a test of the different stages of epic development. In the case of northern as of southern poetry we shall find that every succeeding ideal is marked by its own type of mask, and that Starkad's *rôles* come late in the art of story-telling.

If we look for the earliest tales of dissemblances, we shall go to the gods who showed themselves on earth in order to work their divine will on forgetful man, as when the strangers visited Sodom<sup>5</sup>, or when Apollo<sup>6</sup> prevented Patroklos from outstripping his fate. At about the same time, or perhaps later, men also imagined that gods could endue human forms as their allies. The idea probably arose at the height of the Heroic Age, when it was not supposed that any greater field of achievement was open to the immortals. It was in such a

<sup>1</sup> *Saxo*, vi, lx<sup>b</sup>, p. 297.

<sup>2</sup> *The Elder Edda*, chap. x.

<sup>3</sup> See also *The Golden Bough: Adonis, Attis, Osiris*, vol. II, chap. v, § 1, *Spirits of the Corn and Wild*, vol. II, chap. xvii.

<sup>4</sup> *Saxo*, I, iii<sup>a</sup>, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Gen.* xviii.

<sup>6</sup> *Il.* xvi, 698 ff.

rôle that the gods generally appeared at the siege of Troy<sup>1</sup>. In Northern Europe also divine intervention was so frequent that at the battle of Kalmar the old Danish king Harald thought that Brun, his charioteer, was none other than Othin himself, disguised so as to bring victory or defeat—*dande uel subtrahende opis gracia uersiformi corporis habitu tegi*<sup>2</sup>. And on another occasion that same king was taught the wedge formation by a mysterious old man of great stature, lacking one eye and clad in a hairy mantle<sup>3</sup>. Then we find in other stories that human affairs have become more complex and petty and that the art of deception must be practised with less reliance on force. Thus the Athena who aids Odysseus is more of a trickster than a goddess of war<sup>4</sup>, and even Othin assumes the name and guise of a specific mortal (*eius nomine et habitu subornatus*) to confound counsels and sow discord<sup>5</sup>. Having once given credence to these possibilities, men could not afterwards deny that giants and sorcerers possessed the power to cheat men's eyes—*summa ludificandorum oculorum pericia*<sup>6</sup>. Many other stories, which now exist in a more modern form, must have arisen at this time. We are told how Othin learnt from an oracle that Balder his son could be avenged only by another son born to him by Wrinda, daughter of the Ruthenian king. So the god disguised himself as a mortal and endeavoured, in various human ways, to work his will<sup>7</sup>, till his fellow deities protested against this prostitution of godhead, *scenicis artibus et muliebris officiis suscepione*. Of the same type is the story of Demeter wandering among towns and fields in human form (*εἰδος ἀμαλδύνουσα*) in search of her daughter<sup>8</sup>; or of Apollo's appearance in Admetos's household, and working such wonders for his human master<sup>9</sup>. Possibly the story of Christ's ministry on earth may have appealed to some early converts in this light.

It was only one step to pass from the idea of the disguised god, to the idea of the hero disguised and almost as formidable

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. III, §§ 5-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* VII, lxxiiii<sup>a</sup>, p. 363.

<sup>5</sup> *Saxo*, VII, lxxvi<sup>a</sup>, p. 374.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* III, xxiii<sup>a</sup>, p. 126; xxv<sup>b</sup>, p. 131.

<sup>9</sup> Zenobius, *Cent.* I, 18; *Apoll. Bibl.* III, x, 4; *Eur. Alc.* I ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Saxo*, VIII, lxxviii<sup>a</sup>, p. 390.

<sup>4</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. IV, § 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* I, vi<sup>a</sup>, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Hymn to Demeter*, 90 ff.

as a god. This theme is often connected with the intrusion of a discarded or unrecognised suitor into some wedding feast. Thus Gram, dressed in rags (*extrema uilitatis ueste sumpta*), gained entrance to the marriage of his beloved Signe, daughter of Sumble, and after slaying both host and guests carried off the maiden to his ship<sup>1</sup>. Halfdan allowed Ebbo the Rover to prosecute his courtship of Sigrith till the night of the wedding, and then he burst into the banqueting hall, striking terror with his huge stature and outlandish appearance (*peregrina corporis deformitate*)<sup>2</sup>. Harald attended Wesete's marriage feast disguised as a beggar, and after battering down the bridal chamber, he slew the bridegroom and so won the kingdom of Skaane<sup>3</sup>. Gods had concealed their nature so as to practise deceit. Men did likewise. Hiarn, Fridleif's unsuccessful rival, seeing himself stripped of power, turned to cunning, and after rendering himself unrecognisable (*obscurato oris habitu*) approached his enemy with intent to kill<sup>4</sup>. Men who enjoyed that story would also enjoy hearing how Hagbard, after slaying Signe's brothers, returned in female disguise to woo Signe herself<sup>5</sup>.

Surely it is the mark of a yet later stage in the art of storytelling when the narrator loses interest in the deed of blood, or the supernatural agency, but dwells upon the unexpectedness, the surprise of the event, the contrast between appearances and reality. "Many a stout arm is covered by a pauper's garment" (*vili interdum amiculo validas subesse manus*) says an old northern proverb, and the same sentiment has inspired many tales of princes disguised as peasants. "Mark how his virtue," says Pirithous of Arcite—

*Mark how his virtue, like a hidden sun,  
Breaks through his baser garments<sup>6</sup>.*

To this type of legend belongs the romantic story of Paris, who was exposed on Mount Ida, nursed by a bear, adopted by the peasant Agelaos, and became so formidable a foe to wild beasts and robbers that he was called Alexander<sup>7</sup>. Or the

<sup>1</sup> *Saxo*, I, v<sup>b</sup>, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* vii, lxvi<sup>b</sup>, p. 330.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* vii, lxxiii<sup>b</sup>, p. 361.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* vi, liii<sup>b</sup>, p. 264.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* vii, lxix<sup>a</sup>, p. 341.

<sup>6</sup> *Two Noble Kinsmen*, II, 5.

<sup>7</sup> ἀλέξειν ἀνδρός, *Apoll. Bibl.* III, xii, 5.

story of Havelok who was brought up by Grim the fisherman and goes to seek his fortune in Lincoln dressed in nothing but a sail. When the cook took pity on him and clothed him appropriately, he looked as noble as a king and won fame by his feats of strength and skill among the earl's men<sup>1</sup>. Or again the story how Thorhild, wife of Hunding, degraded her two step-sons Ragnar and Thorwald to the rank of shepherd; and how Swanhwid, daughter of Hadding, rode to Sweden and found them watching their flocks by night, and recognised them by their courage, their noble bearing and their flashing eyes<sup>2</sup>. Or the story how Ole went to Olaf the prince of the "Westerns" disguised as a peasant and was granted the unceremonious hospitality suitable to so humble a rank, and was told of Esa's deadly peril; and how the maiden discovered the breeding and quality of the seeming hind by sheer shrewdness of vision<sup>3</sup>. We may, perhaps, include in this class the Hamlet-like story of Lucius Junius Brutus—*iuvenis longe alius ingenio, quam cuius simulationem induerat*<sup>4</sup>. By concealing his real nature he gains the opportunity of freeing the Roman people, he presents at Delphi a staff of wood containing a rod of gold, the symbol of his own qualities, and while despised as a clown, *ludibrium uerius quam comes*, he not only escapes the ruthlessness of his uncle but guesses the secret on which the kingship of Rome depends. Another, and far more highly developed story of this type, is the fooling of Hrut<sup>5</sup>. Njal instructs Gunnar to disguise himself as Hedinn, the quarrelsome and loquacious pedlar, well known for his evil reputation though not by his face, and shows him how thereby to put his enemy off his guard and to betray him into the formalities which render him amenable to the law. Or again, the story how King Horn, hearing that Rimenild is to be wedded to Athulf, disguises himself as a palmer, sits down on the beggars' seats in the banqueting hall, and when the lady fills his cup, puts to her searching questions to test her fidelity to her lover<sup>6</sup>.

The masquerades of Starkad seem to be very much of this

<sup>1</sup> *Havelok the Dane*, ll. 853 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Saxo*, II, xii<sup>b</sup>, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* VII, lxxv<sup>a</sup>, p. 370.

<sup>4</sup> *Livy*, I, 56.

<sup>5</sup> *Njal*, xxii, xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> *Harl. ms. (2253)*, ll. 1103 ff.

class. Yet not altogether so. The dramatic effect is minimised, but the moral import is barbed and weighted by the irony of the dispositions. The mighty hero counterfeits the appearance of a beggar in order to chastise the lustful goldsmith<sup>1</sup>; he comes as a charcoal burner to reprove Ingild, the son of Frotho<sup>2</sup>. He is not so much the avenger, the Odysseus or the Frederick Barbarossa, as the type of *l'homme* in humility, of uncorrupted justice in an age of extravagance and degeneracy. He is like Sir Orpheo who revisits his realm disguised as a beggar in order to find out whether his steward has remained loyal<sup>3</sup>; or Sir Amiloun who comes as a leper, wheeled in a cart by the faithful Amoraunt. They stop at the door of Sir Amis, his erstwhile friend, the unwitting cause of these calamities. Sir Amis at first ill-treats him, then discovers his identity and overwhelms him with loving attentions<sup>4</sup>. The influence of Christianity is to be traced in these episodes as clearly as anywhere in secular medieval literature. In spirit and purport they are not very far removed from the story invented or propagated by Tzetzes<sup>5</sup> that Belisarius, after his disgrace by Justinian, wandered like Oedipus, changed into a blind beggar.

VIII. *The tone and spirit of Beowulf do not completely harmonise with any of the phases of epic idealism so far discussed. But the conqueror of Grendel shows kinship with yet another type: the men who achieve great feats, yet discard religion because they neither need nor fear supernatural power.*

Do any of these ideals accord with the spirit of *Beowulf*? Not entirely, though we find much suggestive of several successive periods. On the one hand there are many traces of northern mythology, the man-eating troll, the poisonous blood, the charmed weapons, the dragon and buried treasure, the haunted pool, the mystery that hung over subterranean waters, the belief in Wyrd, recollections of the Norns<sup>6</sup>, and of

<sup>1</sup> *Saxo*, vii, lvii<sup>a</sup>, p. 284.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* vii, lx<sup>b</sup>, p. 297.

<sup>3</sup> *Sir Orpheo*, ll. 495 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Amis and Amiloun*.

<sup>5</sup> *Chiliad*, iii, 88, ll. 339 ff.

<sup>6</sup> *Vig-spêda geviofu*, l. 698.

warriors who are fey<sup>1</sup>, the Eotans or giants, and of one version of Ragna Rok, how the universe was overwhelmed by a flood. On the other hand, the warrior himself is not only ignorant of Othin, Frigg, Thor and Asgarth, or of omens such as the shield song<sup>2</sup>, he does not only face the most hazardous and soul-quelling of enterprises without expectation of Valhal or a thought of Hel's kingdom, nor does he seem to be oppressed by what we might call the "starkad-spirit," except perhaps in the third part. He is, as we have seen, all-sufficient in himself. He achieves these marvellous feats for the sheer satisfaction of winning fame and serving his fellow-creatures; he is victorious without superhuman aid or the expectation of a future life. As the portraiture of this hero differs so essentially from that of the familiar pagan character, and as the author of the poem, as we know it, was acquainted with Christianity, it has more than once been argued that *Beowulf* is the product of Christian idealism and represents the influence of the new faith on ancient habits of thought.

The alternative is to regard this warrior as typifying the last phase of pagan sentiment before or while the old world slowly gave way to Christianity. After all, it is not difficult to trace in various legends a tendency towards self-sufficiency and an independence of the supernatural world. In a surviving legend of the Vans' attack on Asgarth, it is noticeable that the battle is decided solely by the personal qualities of the warriors. The Asas display their matchless fortitude, the Vans exercise all their sagacity and cunning and these win the day<sup>3</sup>. The story of Hagbard's tragic wooing<sup>4</sup> has also this spirit of boundless self-reliance and of freedom from superstition. Hagbard the son of Hamund and his brothers met the sons of Sigar and like stout sea rovers they fought hard all day, and as neither side could gain an advantage by nightfall, they parted good friends. Thus Hagbard came to know their sister Signe, and she loved him, despite his ill-favoured looks, because the soul of a hero could be discovered through his

<sup>1</sup> Béor-scealca sum fús and faege, ll. 1241-2.

<sup>2</sup> Tac. *Germ.* iii; *Hóvamól*, clvi; *Voluspó*, xlvi.

<sup>3</sup> Rydberg, *Teut. Myth.* p. 166.

<sup>4</sup> Saxo, vii, lxix<sup>a</sup>, p. 341.

harsh features. He gains access to her bower in disguise, trusting to her love and fidelity. Meanwhile, the serving-woman betrayed him. He offered a desperate resistance in the sleeping chamber but was captured and brought before the assembly and after a stormy debate he was sentenced to death. At the gallows his only thought was of Signe's love. In order to find out whether she would keep her promise, he persuaded the executioner to hang up his empty mantle first, pretending that he wished to see the semblance of his own death. A watcher in the palace reported what he thought was the execution of the condemned man, whereupon Signe and her women set fire to their chamber and hanged themselves. Hagbard saw the building in flames and knowing that he still held the woman's love, he joyfully faced the noose as if it were the instrument of his greatest triumph. This story, though it deals with love, has the stuff out of which such an epic as *Beowulf* is made. Hagbard is braced and ennobled by his passion. He has the epic hero's intense eagerness to accomplish his ends and lordly contempt for all that falls short of his desires. Signe is just as heroic, and neither harbours treacherous doubts or misgivings or hesitates for one moment after the resolve is taken.

In these stories it is to be noticed that the hero faces his purpose without seeing the supernatural world beyond it. His mind is bent on achievement, not on the help or hindrance from the immortal. If men admired such tales and therefore to some extent identified themselves with the type of heroism portrayed therein, is it not possible that they stood outside the religion of their time? Cannot Teutonic mythology, which led men to think so deeply on the mystery of evil and the future of the universe, have led men further still to discard its own traditional explanations, and even its beliefs in supernaturalism? After all, the pagan who believed in Ragna Rok must also have believed that the gods were mortal and so was already half an agnostic. Cannot the latter-day pagan have ended by relying on himself alone? Grimm records several instances of mythical warriors who needed no other moral support than their own stout hearts in order to face the

spiritual as well as the carnal dangers of this life<sup>1</sup>. Thorgils harboured for the whole winter the three formidable outlaws Thormod, Grettir and Thorgeir. He said afterwards that Thormod was a great believer and stood in awe of God, that Grettir was a pagan and stood very much in awe of the powers of darkness, but that Thorgeir simply did not know what fear was<sup>2</sup>. Thorstan and Iockle<sup>3</sup> defied and baffled Leota's fiend-craft through sheer self-confidence and good luck. Ing-wolf and Heor-lief, both descendants of Hrodmund Gripsson, meditated migrating to Iceland in A.D. 874. Ing-wolf prepared a great sacrifice but Heor-lief refused to take part in it—*en Hioerleifr vilde aldrige blóta*<sup>4</sup>. The same is true of Hall and his father Thori Godleas, for both trusted so completely in themselves—*þeir feðgar vildō eige blóta, ok trúðo í mātt sinn*<sup>5</sup>. If this mood was as general as appears from the evidence there must have intervened in the religious history of Europe an epoch of fleeting but magnificent heroism, in which man sought to overcome terror and despondency by ignoring them. If so, we have in *Beowulf* probably the one surviving epic record of this phase.

The objection to this attractive theory is the fact that the poem contains about seventy allusions to Christianity and that, although some of these are repetitions and others of doubtful interpretation, yet at some stage of its evolution the epic must have passed through Christian hands and been prepared for a Christian audience. It may, therefore, represent not the last phase of paganism, but one at least of the early moods of Christianity. This second possibility must now be investigated, partly for its own sake, but more for the prospects which it opens. Just as the problem of the *Odyssey*'s date led us to the discussion of "the intellectual hero," so the religion of Beowulf leads us on to the influence of Christian sentiments on epic literature.

<sup>1</sup> *Teutonic Mythology* by Jacob Grimm. Translated from 4th ed. by J. S. Stallybrass, 1880, vol. I, chap. I.

<sup>2</sup> *Grettissaga*, LI.

<sup>4</sup> *Landnáma-bók*, I, 3, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Vatzd.* xxvi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* I, 4, 4.

## CHAPTER III

### THE TESTIMONY OF GREGORY OF TOURS, BEDE AND SAXO GRAMMATICUS

**F**ORTUNATELY we have ample data for comparing the spirit of *Beowulf* with the spirit which animated the first century of Christianity in England. We turn to Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. This wonderful book has disappointed many readers who are curious to collect samples of pagan folklore. But if Bede has allowed himself to suppress what he must have known about the beliefs and practices of heathens, and to omit what most of his readers must have known about the polity and progress of the true Church, it was because his thoughts were fixed on another aspect of Christianity. He was essentially the chronicler of moods and of states of mind, and of the experiences which arise from ardent longing and intense convictions. As Bede has concerned himself with what one portion of England thought and imagined, he is able unconsciously to throw a flood of light on other fantasies and ideals of which he had no inkling.

**I. Early Christianity, as mirrored by its chroniclers, contained as much romance, enthusiasm, hubris and hero-worship as any epic, and was just as mythopoeic.**

In the first place, it should be remembered that the early historians, however ecclesiastical their sympathies, give ample proof that they were neither recluses nor bigots. They demonstrate again and again that they are in touch with the world of action and the world of romance, so that if their tone is essentially out of touch with paganism the difference does not arise from lack of common ground. Gregory, the historian of the Franks, is a striking example. He became bishop of Tours in A.D. 573, yet the pages of his chronicle contain the inspiration as well as the material for many epics<sup>1</sup>. Bede is far more dis-

<sup>1</sup> E.g. character of the epic warrior quoted from Renatus Frigeridus, ii, 8. The disaster of Quintinus, ii, 9. The breathless story of how Attalus, the hostage, escaped from slavery with Leo's help, iii, 15. How Anastasius escaped from the marble tomb, iv, 12. How Chramnisinde slew Sicharius, ix, 19.

criminating and spiritually minded than Gregory, yet he shows the fullest appreciation of epic qualities. He describes the heathen king Eðilfrid in words which are an epitome of all that the old world most admired: *rex fortissimus et gloriae cupidissimus*<sup>1</sup>. When we come to Osuin, the perfect king, we find that he had all the ancient greatness of a warrior, besides the new-found Christian virtue of humility. He was *aspectu venustus, et statura sublimis et affatu iucundus*<sup>2</sup>. At Selsey a boy destined to die of the plague, instead of the whole monastery, had a vision of the apostles and described them as: *praeclari omnino habitus et vultus, laetissimi et pulcherrimi*<sup>3</sup>. The daemon Becher was asked by his worshippers to describe the apostle Bartholomew, whose presence neutralised his power. He might have been picturing a Greek god or Kjartan, or Siegfried, with his fair skin, large eyes, well-chiselled nostrils, his voice like a trumpet and his knowledge of every language<sup>4</sup>. We have seen how from quite early times men believed in spirits which carried the newly dead out of this world<sup>5</sup>. Under Christian influence these *κῆρες* or *valkyries* or *hæminjes* became infinitely radiant and beautiful, and discharged their mission in dazzling light to the accompaniment of sweet music<sup>6</sup>. There was another well-established conviction that the animal spirits of a human being lingered near the body after death and that if a mortal had been endowed with more than usual vitality or fierceness, these qualities haunted his place of burial<sup>7</sup>. The Egyptians at one time went so far as to believe that as long as the body remained whole, the spirit still lived. So we find again and again in Icelandic sagas that the ghost which haunted a house was as tough as he was strong<sup>8</sup> and if the restless corpse was exhumed, it was discovered to be whole and undecayed<sup>9</sup>. With the advent of Christianity this superstition entered upon a new and wonderful phase. It was found that the sacred virtue of holiness and especially of chastity, which had such

<sup>1</sup> I, 34.

<sup>2</sup> III, 14.

<sup>3</sup> IV, 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Martyrdom of Bartholomew*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. III, § 1; vol. II, chap. XI, § 2.

<sup>6</sup> Bede, *Hist. Eccl.* III, 8; IV, 3, 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Hávarðssaga*, II; *Grettissaga*, LXV.

<sup>9</sup> *Laxd. xxiv*; *Eyrbyggja Saga*, LXIII.

<sup>7</sup> *Ante*, chap. II, § 5.

power to preserve the body from the spiritual death of original sin, did not leave the corpse after carnal death, but kept it free from corruption in the grave. The early Christian teachers had introduced or consecrated, or had heard about, the Jewish custom of burying the dead after wrapping the corpse in grave clothes soaked in preservative oil<sup>1</sup>. The observance of this ancient practice worked wonders on the minds of the newly converted. Their pagan surmises were in a sense established, their vague longing (so characteristic of epic poetry) for immortality was satisfied, but the triumph of the achievement was necessarily attributed to the new religion. It will be shown in a later chapter how powerfully this hope inspired the earlier versions of the "harrowing of hell,"<sup>2</sup> but for the moment it is enough to notice that the belief enlarged the realm of the imagination and enhanced the ideal of what human nature could become<sup>3</sup>. It was even reported that when the three virgins came to prepare Mary's body for burial, the corpse had become so dazzlingly bright that they could not see its form, while their nostrils were met by an odour of great sweetness<sup>4</sup>. There was also a belief that when a deity or demigod touched something, his talents or propensities might cling to the object thus rendered sacred. Witness the gracious story of how Apollo, when helping Alkathoos to build the walls of Megara, laid his lyre against a stone which has never since ceased to render a sound such as that instrument would give<sup>5</sup>. So Christendom believed that the purity and wholesomeness of a saint, whether alive or dead, could be communicated by contact. Gudrun became so pious that her kneelings and tears in Church had the power to disturb the bones of some sorcerers buried beneath<sup>6</sup>. Valentinius is supposed to have told Agathopus that even the food which Jesus ate did not decay in Him<sup>7</sup>. St Augustin records what wonders were worked by the corpses

<sup>1</sup> Known to Romans of St Augustin's time, *Civ. Dei*, xix, 12 and to Gregory of Tours, *Liber Sept. Miraculorum*, xxxv.

<sup>2</sup> *Post*, chap. xi, § 2.

<sup>3</sup> Bede, *Hist. Eccl.* iii, 8 (Abbess Edilberg); iv, 19 (Queen Edilthryd); iv, 30 (St Cuthbert); v, 10 (Albus and Nigellus).

<sup>4</sup> *Passing of Mary*, ix.

<sup>6</sup> *Laxd.* lxxvi.

<sup>5</sup> Paus. i, xlvi, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Clement of Alex. *Stromateis*.

of Gervasius and Protasius when exhumed and exposed in their pristine freshness in St Ambrose's Church<sup>1</sup>. One of the most noticeable of healers was St Benignus. As his feet had been fixed with boiling lead into holes in the stone at Dijon Castle, all who poured offerings into those blessed cavities were cured of their wounds<sup>2</sup>.

Since early Christianity is so often regarded as the religion adapted to the *geneat*, the *cotsetla* and the *gebur*, it is worth noting in what ways the new faith might catch the imagination of people of rank and learning or even of the warrior class. It was, of course, an accepted principle that most miracles were worked for edification. St Augustin was a particularly strong advocate for their authenticity because they draw men's souls by visible wonders to acknowledge those which are invisible<sup>3</sup>, and Gregory of Tours, more than a century later, declared that if the Holy Spirit chose certain saintly men through whom to display supernatural power, it was in order to convert the heathen<sup>4</sup>. Yet the kind of thaumaturgy which we have been discussing is quite distinct from the ordinary popular miracle. To understand the difference, compare the story of the condemned thief who kept invoking St Martin all the time that he was being hanged, and two days later was found alive by a nun whom the saint sent to the rescue<sup>5</sup>. The miracles recorded by Bede have something far nobler and more inspiring. They do not only convert, they reveal new possibilities of human grandeur when mortals are allied to the true gods.

Early Christianity did not only stand between man and his fear of decadence and death; it brought relief to his dread of spiritual enemies and his sense of insecurity. Whatever reasons we may have for believing that certain warriors felt in themselves something stronger and more real than any fancied deity or daemon, yet there can be no doubt that during the Dark Ages both Christians and pagans were profoundly conscious of a *collectatio adversus rectores tenebrarum*. Christianity

<sup>1</sup> *Confess.* ix, 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Liber Primus Miraculorum*, II.

<sup>3</sup> *Civ. Dei*, x, 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Hist. Frank.* I, 36.

*Liber Tert. Miraculorum*, xxi.

provided the surest weapons for such a combat. A Christian like St Alban was *accinctus armis militiae spiritalis*<sup>1</sup>. Pope Gregory is represented not so much as a teacher, but rather as a rescuer, *de dentibus antiqui hostis eripiens*<sup>2</sup>. When Bishop Eparchus once entered his basilica at midnight, he found the church crowded with daemons and their prince in possession of the episcopal chair<sup>3</sup>. When St Cuthbert arrived at a barren and deserted island in order to lead the life of an anchorite, he found the chosen spot infested by devils<sup>4</sup>. The presence of hostile and malignant powers seems to have been realised more vividly than in heathen theology, because Christian defences were more effective. What was once the work of human magicians, was now attributed to *sinistri spiritus, inimica vis daemonum*. Whereas such men as Odd could raise tempests and traverse the sea without a ship<sup>5</sup> or the Permlanders could cast spells upon the sky<sup>6</sup>, or Swan could create darkness and plague Oswif and his friends<sup>7</sup>, or Thorgrima involve Biorn in a storm<sup>8</sup>, in the pages of Bede such machinations are attributed to fiends and daemons. Even in the more specialised control of evil spirits the new religion could surpass the old. Groa promised Svipdag a charm which would calm any storm<sup>9</sup>, but she could not rival the zeal and effectiveness with which Ceadda, the bishop of Mercia, dealt with any tempest<sup>10</sup>. Of all afflictions none seem to be so irresistible as pestilences so these were believed to be entirely the work of God, and St Cuthbert when bishop of Lindsey or Hexham was horrified to find that people in his diocese still resorted to charms in times of sickness<sup>11</sup>. Gróa promised her son a spell which should loosen all fetters<sup>12</sup>, but prayers to the true God had yet greater power. At the battle of Trent a warrior named Imma, who had been left for dead, recovered consciousness and was taken prisoner by the enemy. He pretended to be a "vilein," and submitted to be bound at

<sup>1</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* I, 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* II, 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Hist. Frank.* II, 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* IV, 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Saxo*, v, xxxix<sup>a</sup>, p. 192.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* IX, xcii<sup>a</sup>, p. 452.

<sup>7</sup> *Njal.* XII.

<sup>8</sup> *Eyrbyggja Saga*, XL.

<sup>9</sup> *Svipdagasmól*, XI.

<sup>10</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* IV, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* IV, 27.

<sup>12</sup> *Svipdagasmól*, X.

night, yet the fetters always fell off him. At last it was discovered that his brother, believing him to be dead, had caused many masses to be sung for the release of his soul<sup>1</sup>. When such marvels were believed, it was of little avail that the Valkyrie claimed to teach Sigurth the power of runes<sup>2</sup>, or that Othin knew the spells which would quench fire and calm the sea<sup>3</sup>.

Thus there seems to have been much in common between early English Christianity and the sagas of later heathendom and these similarities are worth insisting on, in order to show that the scheme of *Beowulf* might well have included the sentiments of the new religion. The cast of mind which took pagan theology seriously would be attracted by Christianity, for Christianity appealed to the same instincts but satisfied them more fully. The supernatural world was rendered more magnificent and impressive with its apostolic warriors and messengers of dazzling brightness. The idea of the conflict between Good and Evil and of man's position between these two tremendous powers was still retained, but the forces of Good were more unified and accessible and more amenable to the service of human beings. One remembers how Tatian rejoiced that Christianity had freed him from the machinations and deceptions of the spirit kingdom<sup>4</sup>.

II. *But in other respects Christianity and paganism are irreconcileably opposed. Christianity brought into man's life a new sense of certainty and of fore-knowledge, but made these gifts conditional on the recognition of one's own worthlessness and dependency.*

These are the points of contact between the two faiths. But in certain other respects, Christianity differed profoundly from all previous religions and it is even more significant that *Beowulf* gives no sign of the change which St Augustin and his converts had worked in men's thoughts. Bede's *History* will again provide the surest evidence of what had taken place. The most picturesque and by far the best known illustration is, of course, the celebrated exclamation of the *optimas regis*

<sup>1</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* iv, 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Hóvamól*, cliii, clv.

<sup>2</sup> *Sigydrifumól*, v ff.

<sup>4</sup> Tatian, vii-ix, xvi, xvii.

at the first religious conference in Northumbria. He compares human life to the brief flight of a sparrow through the glare and warmth of a beer hall, while the winter storm rages round the building in the cold and the darkness<sup>1</sup>. There were other reasons for dissatisfaction with the old religion. Clodovech invoked the aid of the Christian deity against the Alemanni and seems, after his victory, to have continued his allegiance because the heathen gods were not strong enough to defend his enemy<sup>2</sup>. Coifi complained that the pagan deities had not upheld and served the interests of their worshippers<sup>3</sup>. But there can be no doubt that the most deep-seated motive for accepting Christianity was the desire for certainty about the nature of the immortals and about the immortality of man.

Boissier<sup>4</sup> has shown how far the *Somnium Scipionis*, as edited and filled with neo-Platonic interpretations by Macrobius, was really a controversial work; an attempt to give to the pagan cults a dogma, a doctrine and the means of explaining the mysteries of the spirit. St Augustin attempted much the same task for Christendom in the *Civitas Dei*. The pagans of the North seem to have reached the state when they found that vagueness and uncertainty were intolerable in their creeds. What do we learn about the later years of Thorkill's life? When he had, as he thought, retired from active adventures, he concentrated his mind on the consideration of pagan mythology and having convinced himself *probabilibus quorundam argumentis* that the soul was immortal, he then went on to speculate on what kind of abode and what kind of rewards awaited the spirit<sup>5</sup>. What did the Roman missionary promise the Kentish men who met him on Thanet? Above all, certainty about their life after death: "aeterna in caelis gaudia et regnum sine fine cum deo vivo et vero futurum *sine ulla dubietate*."<sup>6</sup>

Certainty about the future life, and confidence in the omnipotence of God were essential to the new faith. Without

<sup>1</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* II, 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Hist. Frank.* II, 30.

<sup>3</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* II, 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Fin du Paganisme*, V, 2, 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Saxo*, VIII, lxxxvii<sup>a</sup>, p. 429.

<sup>6</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* I, 25. *Vide* Peada's motives for accepting Christianity, *ibid.* III, 21.

these convictions, the most rugged warrior could not be more than the merest Christian in name. Many other matters became vital to the progress of culture in later ages, but it is difficult to see how even the most secular-minded could in any degree have modelled the character of Beowulf on the ideal of a Christian warrior without filling him with a sure and certain hope of Heaven and a sense of dependence on the unseen power of God. Pagans seem to have altered and added to their mythology, till it had become either too contradictory or too dispiriting. So some seem to have abandoned all belief and to have cultivated a kind of warlike stoicism, unique in the history of the epic. The others seem to have embraced Christianity.

It is necessary to realise how wide the divergence was between these two tendencies, and how impossible to maintain any genuine and lasting sympathy between them. Christianity brought its own atmosphere of grandeur and enthusiasm which might well appeal to the epic temperament, and converts may well have been won over by these attractions. But such neophytes must either have remained merely nominal adherents to the faith, or they must soon have resigned their newly-found tranquillity. When Victorinus became a Christian he began by concealing his faith and smilingly asked “*ergo parietes faciunt Christianos?*”<sup>1</sup> but he soon found he could not remain what Tertullian has called a *condicionalis*<sup>2</sup>, one who temporised with God. If a Christian’s eyes could pierce the veil which hides the spiritual world, he would not only recognise his old gods and demi-gods, now converted into daemons frantic with spite and humiliation, he would also perceive that the new victorious God, for all His mercy and the gift of His only begotten Son, was so incensed against the race which had once ignored Him, that His omnipotence meant inevitable destruction unless He were placated. Christianity was the art of winning over to our side this tremendous power<sup>3</sup>. Besides monsters like Grendel, who could be overcome by fortitude and strength,

<sup>1</sup> St Aug. *Confess.* viii, 8.

<sup>2</sup> *De Idol.* xii.

<sup>3</sup> *Vide* the litany which the monks chanted when the first Christian procession entered Canterbury, *Hist. Eccl.* i, 25.

men were now threatened by a more terrible danger which they had themselves provoked by their unworthiness and which could be averted only by the most strenuous efforts.

How was the wrath of God to be averted and the assistance of God to be invoked against the other spiritual dangers, now only too clearly understood? Eventually this new struggle was to produce one of the noblest epics of all literature, but for the time being every effort seems to have led men further away from the epic ideal, for Christian miracles were accomplished through the negation of self. It is true that the *Benedicti Regula*, which St Augustin and his missionaries brought into England, must have contained something wonderfully humanising. Instead of the anchorite's barbarous ideal of St Antony wrestling in solitude and starvation, these northerners were offered a life of brotherhood during which to combat the army of evil spirits. Well might the saint declare that *inenarrabili dilectionis dulcedine curritur via mandatorum Dei*<sup>1</sup>. But at the same time he was founding a *dominici scola servitii*<sup>2</sup>. Nay, more, a monk was to believe himself to be the lowest and the vilest in the world<sup>3</sup>. The special marks of divine favour and power were accorded only to those who had so completely suppressed or expelled their own nature that they were able to absorb the divine spirit. Supernatural power was never theirs; it was attracted to them by their selflessness. In fact, when a monk of a Bordeaux monastery once averted a storm of rain from a newly made stack of hay by flinging himself on the ground and devoting himself to prayer, all names were suppressed so as not to give occasion to vanity, and the monk himself was severely punished for seeking glory through miracles<sup>4</sup>. Gregory has himself described under what conditions the divinity of God can be applied to human uses<sup>5</sup>. As far as the early Christian wielded the power or controlled the forces of the true God, it was not by deeds but by words. Mellitus was of noble blood and, though crippled with gout, he rose to be archbishop of Canterbury. One day the city caught fire, and

<sup>1</sup> *Prologue*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Cap. vii, *Septimus humilitatis gradus*.

<sup>4</sup> *Hist. Frank.* iv, 34.

<sup>5</sup> *Expositio beati Job*, xxvii, 11, 21, to 1, col. 862. Ben.

the flames, completely out of control, laid waste a large part of the town and were now rolling towards the *episcopium*. The prelate, though physically too weak to walk, was carried to the scene and there *coepit orando periculum infirmus abigere, quod firma fortium manus multum laborando nequiverat*<sup>1</sup>. He had so often conquered the flames and storms of passion and temptation through the help of God, that the divine influence did not fail him when he faced earthly fire.

The Homeric warriors who received divine help rose to this height by ambition and self-confidence. The northern pagans aspired to become super men by the knowledge and application of runes, or by the wisdom to be learnt from birds and serpents. With the Christian it was generally the sense of utter worthlessness, the consciousness of evil or the fear of God's wrath. Their ideal ended by being the exclusion of everything that the epic world desired. Well might Paulinus, the priest who accompanied Edilberga when she came to the heathen court of Eduini, confess *difficulter posse sublimitatem animi regalis ad humilitatem viae salutaris et suscipiendum mysterium vivifcae crucis inclinari*<sup>2</sup>. In fact the chieftains who accepted the cross often ended by resigning their worldly state. Eorwend the Christian became a hermit in his old age<sup>3</sup>, so did As-wolf his grandson<sup>4</sup>. King Brian would not fight on a fast-day<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps the most conspicuous example is that of the celebrated warrior Sigbert. He had been a fugitive from the hatred of Redwald and had passed years of exile in France. He finally mounted the throne of East Anglia and began to devote his life to spreading the culture which he had studied in exile. Yet though engaged in such good work, he ended by yearning for a more cloistered and austere piety. So he left all these projects to his kinsman Egric and immured himself in a monastery. When Penda led the Mercians into East Anglia and his subjects tried to persuade their king to appear at the head of his army, the once hardened soldier refused and finally consented on the condition that he appeared without arms, carrying only a rod. In this way he met his death<sup>6</sup>. Thus when the seed fell on good ground

<sup>1</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* II, 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* II, 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Landnáma-bóc*, I, 7, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* I, 7, 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Njal. clvi.*

<sup>6</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* II, 15; III, 18.

the change which it could work on human nature was astounding. Gregory even ruled that *voluptas ipsa esse sine culpa nulla tenus potest*<sup>1</sup>. One thinks of Sainte-Beuve's comment, "Il n'y a que le christianisme qui *renverse l'homme*."

### III. Beowulf in relation to Christian tendencies.

Sigbert's story is of course an extreme case, and moreover it is recorded by an ardent partisan of the new faith. But it must have passed for true and it refers to a warrior and a nobleman. It illustrates in a heightened and telling way the kind of influence which Christianity exercised over men's minds, even of those born to authority. How can the *Beowulf*, even in its present form, be a genuine product of this phase? Of course it can quite well be argued that Christian heroes in the beer hall still gave themselves up to the enjoyment of heathen tales of adventure, as "the warrior Alfred, surrounded by *thegn* and *gesith*, listening to the 'Saxon songs,' which he loved, was yet the same Alfred who painfully translated Gregory's *Pastoral Care* under the direction of foreign clerics."<sup>2</sup> We may also agree with Prof. Chadwick that the Christian allusions (of which he counts seventy) were added later as "substitutes for objectionable matter."<sup>3</sup> These are matters of conjecture. We can never know for certain whether the Christian touches were added by another hand, later or contemporary; and whether the heathen rites of burial were merely a tradition not quite perfectly recollected; just as we can never know whether the Anglo-Saxon songs, which Alfred enjoyed, were purely heathen or influenced by Christianity, like so many of Saxo's stories<sup>4</sup>. These are not, perhaps, matters of primary importance. The whole value of this problem of date and authorship is that the discussion carries us out of such narrow limits to consider the significance of two rival tendencies, of which we ourselves are a product. To which effort towards human greatness, to which civilising impulse and dream of perfection does the poem introduce us? We can accept Prof. Chambers's contention that the Scandinavian

*Hist. Eccl.* i, 27.

<sup>2</sup> R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction*.

<sup>3</sup> *Heroic Age*, chap. IV, pp. 47-58.

<sup>4</sup> *Post*, § 4.

traditions were brought over by the English settlers in the sixth century and must have been worked into an Anglian dialect soon after, and must then in the seventh century have been transposed or paraphrased into West Saxon. We may even believe that the poet who transposed the composition or gave it its present form was, like Redwald<sup>1</sup>, or Helgi the Lean<sup>2</sup>, a practitioner of both religions, or had received the *primsigning* as Gisli and Vestein did, avowedly to facilitate intercourse with Christians, or was the kind of worshipper who might have exclaimed *si ego ibidem cum Frankis meis fuisse, iniurias eius vindicassem*<sup>3</sup>. But whoever breathed into this epic its poetry and idealism, was he pagan or Christian *at heart*?

It seems to the present writer incontestable that the man who put his soul into *Beowulf* was not, as Klaeber argues<sup>4</sup>, a Christian in thought and spirit. In the preceding chapter we have made this question the excuse for studying pagan tendencies. In the present chapter we have discussed the very ~~diverse~~ direction in which Christianity was moving. It remains to point out that if the poet had felt in any real sense the new religion he would have given some more definite sign of his convictions. He would have made his hero repent of his sins or look to the life to come, or perhaps, like Orm in *Orm-spátr Stórlfssonar*, make a vow for victory. At the battle of Ashdown Alfred led the Saxon charge "with the rush of a wild boar," yet Asser carefully adds that he relied on God's counsel and trusted in his aid, while King Aethelred still lingered in his tent hearing mass<sup>5</sup>. Beowulf need not have been quite so devout, but he might well have put a crucifix on his shield as Thangbrand did when challenged by Thorkell<sup>6</sup>, or have prayed to God as even Flosi did before setting out to commit murder<sup>7</sup>, or have crossed himself, as Njal did when he laid himself down with Bergthora and Thord on the bed to await death<sup>8</sup>. The emissary of Count Ollo, dispatched to exact

<sup>1</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* II, 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Landnáma-bók*, III, 14, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Clovis's celebrated exclamation on being told about the crucifixion. *Decline and Fall*, chap. xxxviii.

<sup>4</sup> "Die Christlichen Elemente in Beowulf," *Anglia*, xxxv, xxxvi.

<sup>5</sup> *A.S. Chronicle*, A.D. 871. Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, chaps. 37-9 (Stevenson's edition). <sup>6</sup> *Njal*. xcvi. <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* cxxv. <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* cxxviii.

a fine from the monastery of St Martin de Leré, fell down with sudden pain and, though a pagan, is reported to have prayed that the sign of the cross might be made over him<sup>1</sup>. Again, Christianity had its own teratology often enriched from heathen sources, as St Augustin proves<sup>2</sup>. Yet it is curious that the treatise based on that chapter, *De Monstris et Belluis*<sup>3</sup>, introduces one monster with *quod credere profanum est*<sup>4</sup>, the breed which lives in marshes and lakes, and another type with *quod dici nefandum est*<sup>5</sup>, the breed which seeks its prey by night. Both types are placed à l'index, as being specifically heathen. On the other hand, Beowulf's career is quite consistent with pagan ideals, even as understood in Christian times. Olaf Havardson was like Beowulf in a narrow world. He devoted his strength to the service of others. He rescued their sheep and he fought the trolls who haunted their houses. Yet it was not till after his death that his father thought of bringing Christianity into the family<sup>6</sup>.

#### iv. *Saxo Grammaticus in relation to Christian tendencies.*

So far we have formed our idea of Christianity in an ecclesiastical atmosphere, and we have argued by analogy that such an influence cannot have played an integral part in the composing of *Beowulf*, or the effect would have been unmistakeable. But this is merely a negative contention. Let us see how the new faith has coloured the thoughts and chastened the inspiration of a professed admirer of the ancient world, who was deeply versed in the lore of these ancient sagas.

Saxo Grammaticus is an almost ideal subject for comparison. Though he began working on the *Gesta Danorum*, which also contains many Norwegian legends, as late as the twelfth century, between the years 1179 and 1186, Christianity was only just making its influence felt in his country. Heathen communities in Smaland, on the Danish border, had been invaded by Sigurth the Crusader in the previous generation, and during the writer's own lifetime Othin appears to have been worshipped in the less civilised parts of Sweden, and men still believed that the Asas lived and ruled in Asgarth<sup>7</sup>. The Christian Church was still like a missionary settlement

<sup>1</sup> *Hist. Frank.* vii, 42.

<sup>2</sup> *De Civ. Dei*, xvi, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ante*, chap. i, § 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Cap. xxxvii.*

<sup>5</sup> *Cap. xlvi.*

<sup>6</sup> *Hávarðssaga Isfirðings*, i–iii, xxiv.

<sup>7</sup> Rydberg, *Teutonic Mythology*, § 48.

feeling its way into men's bosoms. His mind must have been shaped by ecclesiastical culture, for he wrote Latin prose and verse diversified by monkish phraseology and yet somehow impressed with classical form, even if lacking *Ciceronis lineamenta*. On the other hand, Denmark was as primitive as the England of Bede. Except for some annals and devotional works, blank with the tastelessness of the Dark Ages, this country had produced no literature in Latin, nor were the Danes apparently touched with the new interests which found expression elsewhere in the *Chansons de Geste*. Thus no artistic tradition, no refinements of feudal culture, stood between Saxo and the wealth of lore and legend which had survived oral tradition, and perhaps in prose narratives till his day, but which have since disappeared. Above all, he had the epic poet's temperament; he was awed and inspired by the greatness of his argument. Though we need not take too literally the professions of unworthiness with which he enters on his task, there can be no doubt that this churchman thought far less of his own fame than of the glorious past of his country. And although he seems to have been over-anxious to analyse his material, to dwell on a thought and repeat and amplify it, to multiply the personalities of his mythical heroes and to divide amongst them the traditional stock of heroic feats<sup>1</sup>, yet it is certain that Saxo's chief hope was to show his compatriots how great their national heroes had been and that his chief reward was *voluptatem ex majorum recordacione percipere*.

What picture, then, does Saxo give of the ancient world and of its heroes? If we can answer that question at all satisfactorily we shall have made some steps towards understanding the difference between the epic spirit and early Christianity. In the first place it is important to notice that the compiler had a sense of human grandeur and lordliness such as we have learnt to regard as the essence of the epos. He had the epic poet's eye for wealth and magnificence. He lingers with obvious pride and pleasure over the description of the feast which the Britons provided for Frotho, full of admiration, not only for the jewelled cups and groaning tables, but also for the crimson hangings, gold embroidered couches, the perfumed

<sup>1</sup> Rydberg, *op. cit.* § 23; Olrik, *Sources of Saxo Grammaticus*, 1892-4.

censters and brilliant lamps<sup>1</sup>. Helge, the Norwegian, courts Helga for his bride in a ship fitted with gilt masts and rigged with crimson ropes and with sails decked with gold<sup>2</sup>. The chronicler cares less for war than for the spirit which war inspires. He likes to unveil the souls of his heroes, and to show how magnificently some of them rise to the height of the great occasion. Above all, he endeavours to give some idea of their devoted loyalty, their contempt of death, and their complete confidence in the righteousness and splendour of their ideal.

Many examples might be quoted to show that Saxo was not incapable of recognising and appreciating the ideals of the Heroic Age. In fact it is thanks to this predilection that his material lends itself so readily to the comparative study of epics, and many illustrations of the Heroic Age have already, in an earlier chapter, been drawn from *Gesta Danorum*. At the same time Saxo is not consistent. He *lapses* into epic, apparently when he is taken off his guard; but the general effect of his chronicle is not heroic in the sense that *Beowulf* is heroic. There are only a few direct allusions to Christianity, but the dominant tone is Christian. We shall see later<sup>3</sup> how in the eleventh century the Christian and pagan spirits began really to be reconciled, and how this movement finds complete expression in the *Chanson de Roland*. Saxo, though born out of due time, belongs to an earlier age. When he stops to think, his tone is that of Alcuin: *rex ille aeternus regnat in caelo, ille paganus perditus plangit in inferno*<sup>4</sup>. This unepic spirit is particularly noticeable, except for the examples already given, when the compiler deals with the supernatural.

We have seen that the enthusiasm and dignity of the pagan epos were accompanied by freedom from religious fear. The warriors who sustain a life of heroism, do so not by belittling their gods, but by rising to the divine level; enlisting their help, proving worthy of their friendship, or even by excelling them in force or fraud. So it is significant that although Saxo is so profound and often sympathetic a student of ancient lore and tradition, he is utterly out of sympathy with this attitude.

<sup>1</sup> v, 1<sup>b</sup>, p. 252.

<sup>3</sup> *Post*, chap. v.

<sup>2</sup> vi, lviii<sup>b</sup>, p. 291.

<sup>4</sup> To bishop of Lindisfarne.

It is doubtful how far he recognised even the power of Fate. He alludes twice<sup>1</sup> to the Parcae, once in connection with the observance of omens which he discredits, and once in Hildiger's fine death song. Such an allusion would be more significant, if it did not stand alone and if out of all the hundreds of speeches made in the heat of battle or in the face of death, at least a few contained references to the power in which the epic warrior trusted. Besides, Saxo's attitude to the gods of the Heroic Age is not merely one of indifference. He is vengeful and contemptuous as one would expect from the devotee of a rival faith. His Christian sympathies spoil his rendering of the Balder myth. When Hother confronts his rival for the hand of Nanna he finds that all the immortals are ranged against him. But in Saxo's version the discomfiture of the gods is so complete and ludicrous that we hardly need his reminder that these allies are not really divine but are only called so<sup>2</sup>. In fact in another connection he hazards the supposition that Thor and Othin were really men who made a reputation for divinity through magic<sup>3</sup>. It was indeed impossible for Saxo to sympathise with the spirit of heathen mythology. It has already been explained how the epic era closed with the growth of later superstition and how the missionaries intensified this sense of spiritual insecurity and vulnerability by adding to the army of ghostly enemies all the deities displaced by the new religion. How, then, is Saxo to view the heroic demigods of ancient time whose exploits attained to that degree of superhuman excellence just beyond the reach of man? Incredible as it may seem, he has no choice but to class them among those who gain more than human power through alliance with the Devil: *Triplex quondam mathematicorum genus inauditi generis, miracula discretis exercuisse prestigiis*<sup>4</sup>. So we find the primordial giants, the oracle mongers and the latter-day magicians all classed together. What else could a Christian think when he hears that men wield power which should belong only to God?

<sup>1</sup> vi, liv<sup>b</sup>, p. 272; vii, lxxii<sup>b</sup>, p. 356. <sup>2</sup> iii, xxiii<sup>a</sup>, p. 118. <sup>3</sup> vi, lv<sup>a</sup>, p. 274.

<sup>4</sup> "In those days three kinds of magicians with subtlety and skill worked marvels such as the world had never known," i, v<sup>b</sup>, p. 34.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE EVIDENCE GATHERED FROM OLD ENGLISH CHRISTIAN “EPICS”

HAVING consulted two Christian chroniclers, let us now take a glance at some narrative poems which are beyond all dispute Christian. We shall find that we are in a civilisation which has definitely turned its back on heathendom; an age which has already closed its grasp on the future. To begin with, wherever the early missionaries went, they founded a seat of learning. In 597, St Augustin preached in Thanet, and almost at once Canterbury became a centre of culture. In 635 Aidan, the Irish monk, came from Iona and started spreading Christianity from Northumberland southwards, and thus St Hilda's monastery came to be founded at Whitby. In 668 Theodore of Tarsus, who had studied Greek at Athens, arrived in England. In the same year Benedict Biscop (or Baducing), a Northumbrian noble, who had twice visited Rome, founded the schools of St Peter and of St Paul near Jarrow, and the celebrated African monk Adrian joined the school at Canterbury.

#### *I. The atmosphere in which Old English Christian epics were produced.*

So the new religion, quite apart from its tenets, must have brought hopefulness and enthusiasm into England. The emissaries of Christ did not only, as we have seen, reveal the secrets of the next world and the perils of this one, they introduced their converts to the wisdom and inspiration of antiquity. The famous library at York contained the works of Vergil, Statius, Lucan, Pliny, Cicero, besides nearly all the great Christian apologists. Aldhelm, in a letter to Acircius, quotes from Vergil, Ovid, Lucan, Cicero, Pliny, Sallust, Solinus, Juvenal, Sedulius, Arator, Alcimus, Avitus, Prudentius, Prosper, Corippus, Venantius Fortunatus, Paulinus of

Périgueux, and Paulus Quaestor<sup>1</sup>. No wonder some of the Saxon monasteries became educational centres for Western Europe and produced such scholars as Bede and Alcuin. Besides, the copying and reading of books was practised as a religious observance, almost as a charm against evil. We shall discuss in a subsequent chapter the way men of the later Middle Ages availed themselves of learning to rescue their souls from terror and despair. In these earlier times they seem also to have cherished the kind of ideal which inspired Cassiodorus, the founder of one of the then richest libraries in Europe *unde et anima susciperet aeternam salutem et casto atque purissimo eloquio fidelium lingua comeretur*<sup>2</sup>. Alcuin began his treatise *De Virtutibus et Virtutis* with the contention that true wisdom was to be found only in obedience to God. Yet he also wrote *Libellus de Sancta Trinitate* to prove that dialectics were necessary to the full exposition of dogma, he plunged into the controversy over adoptionism and monophysitism, and spent all his long, laborious life in compiling and diffusing knowledge.

It was in such an atmosphere and among such surroundings that *Juliana*, *Elene*, *Andreas* and *Christ* were produced. At first there seems to be nothing surprising in the possibility of a monk or a priest or a monastic student turning his hand to the composition of an epic. Although the scholars of the seventh and eighth centuries enjoyed intermittent periods of peace and progress, warfare was still the most absorbing of worldly and human pursuits. Nor do masterpieces develop during the throes of some great national struggle. The ballads and the traditions may arise at that time, but the epic inspiration comes later when the nation has settled down to develop its conquests and is conscious of its power and progress. And if the Angles and Saxons (though never wholly at peace) were now so thoroughly committed to the possession and enjoyment of their lands that they were beginning to forget how to build ships and would soon need to be taught the art of angling, they would not therefore be less willing or less competent to

<sup>1</sup> For question of early Christian erudition see G. A. Smithson, *The Old English Christian Epic*, Univ. of Calif. Publs. in Mod. Phil. vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 303-400, 30 Sept. 1910. <sup>2</sup> *De Institutione Divinarum Artium*, Praefatio.

appreciate an epic. Besides, a poet of the new school would come to his task with a broader and a more varied mind. He would have studied the warlike books of the Old Testament; he might have derived ideas from Vergil and Statius; if he had met Theodore of Tarsus, or if any tradition had been started by that early Grecian, he may even have known something of Homer and Hesiod. Surely such opportunities would have produced some one sufficiently inspired and original to combine the old fighting spirit of paganism with the enthusiasms of Christianity.

As we have seen, *Beowulf* has sometimes been thought to be the fruit of such a combination, but there are other unmistakable examples which will demonstrate, by comparison, what the type really was like.

II *Early Christian narrative poems have the mannerisms, style, phraseology and sometimes the technique of epics, but seldom or never the epic spirit. They are more likely to develop the qualities of romance. Andreas the test case.*

*Christ, Juliana, Elene, Judith and Andreas* celebrate the triumph of the new religion over the old. On the one side stands the true God or his emissary backed by the hosts of angels; on the other there are the pagans or the Jews supported by Satan. In the end the Divine Power, by whatever means, triumphs over the forces of Evil and the victory rests with Christianity. Thus at first glance one might be tempted to conclude that these poems still cherish the old spirit in a newer form; that they proclaim the heroism and self-confidence of man, though displayed in another cause. Even Cynewulf's *Christ*, though the most didactic, is not without action. There is much to remind us of the old warlike epic in the phraseology<sup>1</sup>, and to judge by the thought, the poem was designed for men familiar with the sentiments of the warrior class, even if they were not warriors themselves. When God pronounces the doom of man, he does not keep to Bible language. The epic horror of war is admirably expressed<sup>2</sup>. In the remarkable passage

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Cristes þegnas, l. 282; þegnas þrym-fulle, l. 540.

<sup>2</sup> ll. 622-4. For epic distaste of battle see *ante*, vol. I, chap. II, § 7.

celebrating the gifts of the mind, the poet includes skill in battle, especially in what must have been the tensest moments, when the storm of darts and the winged javelin come flying over the rim of the shield. Moreover, the poet loves to draw his metaphors and similes from war. In describing Christ's descent into Hell, something like a pagan battle seems to have been waged against the *deofla cempan*; and the attacks of Satan are spoken of as "the Devil's missiles," or as "the spear storm." So it might look as if we have here the beginnings and the atmosphere of the true Christian epic. Its fundamental idea is that of God's second coming on earth and consequently much of it deals with the hopes and fears of the faithful and with the tremendous issues involved in the end of the world. But the poem is concerned with deeds as well as with emotions, as far as the poet describes Christ's ascension and the Last Judgment Day.

And yet *Christ* is epic only in a few of its expressions. The real spirit of the poem is found in the idea of man lying a helpless captive till rescued by divine power<sup>1</sup>. For Christ always conquers easily *gæstes mægne*<sup>2</sup>, or *ānes meahtum*<sup>3</sup>. Finally we have the striking passage explaining what is *Lifes wisdóm*<sup>4</sup>, namely, to realise the certainty of the last judgment, the prospect of the soul perishing through sin, and the need of foreseeing and preparing for an eternity in one of two worlds. In fact the poem has borrowed nothing from the epic but its form and style. But then, as now, why should the Devil have all the best tunes? The authors of *Juliana* and *Elene* are just as far from any sense of human greatness. They seem to be composing in the spirit of Cassiodorus, as if books were designed to reveal the superiority of God over man. Though *Juliana* displays the greatest fortitude in her sufferings, and the greatest heroism in overcoming her ghostly adversary, yet the inspiration of the poem comes less from the thought of her valour than from the contemplation of her union with Christ. *Elene* sets out like a warrior at the head of her *comitatus*. Judas refuses to disclose the hiding place of the cross, so the

<sup>1</sup> *E.g.* ll. 361 ff., 148 ff., 560 ff.

<sup>3</sup> l. 566.

<sup>2</sup> l. 144.

<sup>4</sup> ll. 1550 ff.

Amazonian pilgrim starves him into surrender. Yet her action gives the reader no consciousness of human resolution and self-reliance. It is because her firmness does not proceed from her character. *Judith* has all the accessories of an epic. The description of the wolf, the raven and the eagle<sup>1</sup> has often been noticed; the enumeration of the spoils<sup>2</sup>, the picture of the feast<sup>3</sup>, the mention of Holofernes's retinue<sup>4</sup> and the glimpse of the routed Assyrians<sup>5</sup> should also be remembered. But when we come to the achievement itself, we give the glory to God and not to Judith. If there is any genuine epic touch it will be found in the suggestion of the power and prowess of Judith's victim.

But the test of the early Christian epos is surely *Andreas*. The poem reads as if it were specially composed for warriors who were used to epics. The story itself suggests an epic adventure. God is a Teutonic king, the creator of heroes, the helm of Athelings; his apostles are thegns or earls. One of them, Matthew, is in the power of a cannibal tribe in the distant Crimea, and they are veritable monsters, hardly less revolting than Grendel or Polyphemos or Cacus, but fully armed, brandishing their lances. Andrew is dispatched to rescue his brother in arms. At first the hero shrinks from his perilous task, but in the end he is "not late for the battle."<sup>6</sup> So he embarks, endowed with God-like power for his mission, and all hopes of an epic are at an end. He meets a storm, but the boat, foam flecked, rides like a bird over the billows. When he reaches Mermedonia the prison doors fly open; the guards fall dead; Matthew leads out the long file of captives. Then the hungry cannibals gather round the prison to wreak their wrath on Andrew. As if to prepare us for the climax God himself rouses the man to face the ordeal, which is spoken of as a battle. Yet what does Andrew have to undergo? Three days' torture, epic in nothing but exaggeration. Suffering can be epic, if the sufferer develops the heroic mood. But Andrew depends entirely on God's support<sup>7</sup> and ultimately

<sup>1</sup> ll. 205-12.

<sup>2</sup> ll. 314<sup>b</sup>-319<sup>a</sup>, 335<sup>b</sup>-342<sup>a</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> ll. 7<sup>b</sup>-34<sup>a</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> ll. 62<sup>b</sup>, 69<sup>b</sup>-73<sup>a</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> ll. 209<sup>b</sup>-312<sup>a</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> l. 233.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. ll. 1430 ff.

triumphs through a miracle. The spirit of an epic is much better displayed in *The Seafarer* where the hero knows only too well the hardships of the ocean but overcomes his aversion by the insatiable desire to travel<sup>1</sup>. If the *Andreas* ever rises to the heights of genuine poetry it is by its touches of romance. We have already noticed this quality even in classically epic poems. It is hard to define, though easy to recognise<sup>2</sup>. For instance, in the *Odyssey*, the help rendered to the hero by Athena is epic. The mortal earns it; he is like the goddess; her assistance is in keeping with his character. He can avail himself of supernatural aid only by the strength of his own manhood and assurance. But when Leukothee<sup>3</sup> suddenly issues out of the storm like a sea-gull, gives him a magic veil and plunges again into the dark turbid swell, then we have romance. Or again, there is something romantic in the thought of Gunnar lying sleepless on the night after the murder of Sigurth and suddenly recalling what the raven and eagle told him as he rode home<sup>4</sup>. The human aspect of the event (however important for the plot or moral) has nothing to hold our emotions; so the poet brings into the situation something strange, unexpected, mysterious. Our interest is occasionally diverted from the human adventurers, to the unseen and supernatural world in the midst of which they move. So with the *Andreas*. Its best passage draws our attention to the three mysterious shipmasters who exercise such uncanny power over the waves, and ply Andrew with such searching questions, while the storm still rages, and then lap him in sleep while the sea is calmed and the boat speeds onward to the land of Mergedonia.

III. *The incompatibility of paganism and Christianity. The doctrine of original sin versus the management of a comitatus. The problem of fusing such conflicting ideals not solved in pre-Norman poetry. Alfred's career shows which way civilisation was moving.*

Probably no poem on a devotional, or at any rate on a Christian subject, could at this period have attained to epic

<sup>1</sup> I.e. pt I, ll. 1-63.

<sup>3</sup> *Od.* v, 333 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, chap. I, § 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Brot af Sigurtharkvithu*, xiii.

inspiration. So far we have discussed Christianity as it must have appeared to the inquirer who was inclined to weigh the promises of the new faith with the religion which he or his fathers had held. We have found that Bede gave us that point of view, because so much of his narrative is concerned with missionary work and with the dissemination of early, almost primitive doctrines. But even the *Historia Ecclesiastica* gives hints of deeper and more disturbing doctrines, with which Bede himself is familiar but on which he does not dwell, and those who set themselves to study the tenets of the new religion for its own sake must have found more than enough to overthrow their ideas of heroism and manhood. In the background of Christian doctrine there lurked the conviction that all human beings are irrevocably tainted with sin and abandoned to a kind of spiritual rottenness from which they could not be rescued without the special interposition of heavenly power. Suppose that serious-minded and imaginative *optimas*, who in the Northumbrian Council compared each human being to a sparrow flying through the lighted beer hall, out of the dark and into it again--suppose some such intelligent seeker after Truth to have pushed his inquiries further and to have learnt from St Augustin of the utter degradation of mankind and of the terrible future which awaited him and his fellow-creatures in God's wrath—with what heart could he return to the *béots* of the banquet and the enthusiasms of the *comitatus*? He was more likely to retell from Gregory's *Historia Frankorum*<sup>1</sup> how the citizens of Saragossa defended their town against Childebert and Chlothacharius in 542 by fasting and carrying the tunic of St Vincent round the walls in procession, wearing hair shirts, the women following in black and weeping. Or he might remember that when Andreas had reached the extreme of his torments, it was the Devil who appeared as a crowned king and taunted him, using the heathen's favourite gibe at Christian submissiveness. He must at least have read in Augustin's *Confessions* that it is pride, the most besetting of the deadly sins, which prompts the cultivation of high-spiritedness (*superbia celsitudinem imitatur*)<sup>2</sup>. How could he so

<sup>1</sup> III, 29.

<sup>2</sup> II, 6.

much as recognise the immanence of the soul without despising its perishable vesture the body—*quoniam haec manet illa perit*<sup>1</sup>? Alcuin, in his often-quoted letter to Hygebald, bishop of Lindisfarne, complains that churchmen, in their moments of leisure, listened to harpists and *carmina gentilium*. But because such abuses were discovered in Northumbrian monasteries (the writer does not say how few) and because certain Christians lent an idle ear to the fables, it does not follow that they lent their emotions also. In fact the great humanist is quite explicit on the incompatibility of Christian and pagan sentiments. *Angusta est domus; utrosque tenere non poterit. Non vult rex coelestis cum paganis et perditis nomine tenus regibus communionem habere*<sup>2</sup>.

Suppose that some young poet, capable of becoming a minstrel, was attracted by Alcuin or Bede to the school of York and there learnt how our original ancestors had played away the happiness of the whole race and had left us all doomed to the bottomless pit and to eternal fire, unless God should so far put away his righteous indignation as to take pity on us—how could such a one then go back to his monarch's court and sing of the glory and the perfection of the ancient heroes? We shall trace in a subsequent chapter<sup>3</sup> the growth and dissemination of this mournful doctrine, till it became one of the recognised facts of life; and then we shall see how civilisation adapted itself to its desolating influence and triumphed over it. In fact a great epic arose out of the conquest of original sin. But no such humanistic consummation seems to have been possible at this stage. For one reason, the idea was not yet sufficiently universal to become a menace to progress. It was not like Pilgrim's Slough of Despond, through which every traveller must pass, but rather like some locality which can be visited or avoided according to the temperament and training of the wayfarer. In the secular world, full of family feuds, border raids, looting expeditions and sudden invasions by the pirates from across the sea, there was too much need of self-assertion, self-reliance and pride of place.

<sup>1</sup> Alcuin's epitaph composed by himself in St Martin's Church.

<sup>2</sup> *Mon. Germ. Epist. Carol.* II, 241.

<sup>3</sup> *Post*, chap. ix.

As early as the days of Tacitus we learn that the Germans were desperately reckless in their sports, simply in order to impress the onlookers (*preium est voluptas spectantium*)<sup>1</sup>. As late as Eginhard we are told that the Saxons proved to be the most obstinate of Charlemagne's opponents because they had the heathen's aggressive pride (*et natura feroce et cultui daemonum dediti*)<sup>2</sup>. The warrior who needed to hold together his *comitatus* by his personal ascendancy and by the prospect of wealth, would prefer his own courage to be sustained and the boastful spirits of his men to be kindled by some pretentious tale of daring, rather than listen to an allegory of man's moral worthlessness and of the urgent need of God's help. Christianity was suspected of inspiring fear. There was a story that Christ shrank from the challenge to single combat which Thor sent him<sup>3</sup>. When Hrafn the Red fled at the battle of Dublin and was chased into a river, he saw all Hell open before him, while devils tried to drag him into the abyss<sup>4</sup>. Berserkers were supposed to be possessed by evil spirits, as was Lodmund the Old<sup>5</sup>, or the two who were vanquished when they waded through consecrated fire<sup>6</sup>. Even so deeply religious a king as St Olaf had to order the Icelander Thormódr Kolbrúnarskald to recite the old *Biarkamál* before the battle of Stiklestad<sup>7</sup>. Those who gave themselves up wholeheartedly, like Sigbert, to the sobering thoughts on human sinfulness, became eremites or devotees.

So the heathen tradition persisted, and young poets would have to choose between two careers. They could serve the fighting men and create or recast pagan lays, as if their audiences were still, at heart, unconverted; or they could surrender to the appeal of learning and study in a monastic school the arts of warning humbler folk against the spiritual dangers which threatened them. No doubt the less experienced and the more enterprising might hope to follow the examples of St Eligius, St Léger, St Ouen, and St Arnulphus, and so

<sup>1</sup> *Germ.* xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> *Vita Caroli*, vii.

<sup>3</sup> *Njal.* xcvi; *Cristne Saga*, iii, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Njal.* clvi.

<sup>5</sup> *Landnáma-bók*, iv, 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Cristne Saga*, ii, 1; v, 5.

<sup>7</sup> A.D. 1030. See Chadwick, *Heroic Age*, chap. v.

play an influential part in some king's councils, though such eminence was more likely to be reached at the Merovingian Court than in England. But whether in a palace or a monastery, the most ambitious would generally find themselves limited by training and opportunity to the compilation of a chronicle. Perhaps, in poems like *Judith* and *Andreas*, they might make the first tentative and one-sided efforts at combining pagan heroism with Christian devotion.

An almost perfect representative of the new movement is found in Wynfrith who afterwards became St Boniface. He was born in the second half of the seventh century; he belonged to one of the ruling families of Devonshire; and he was destined by his father to be the heir to his broad acres. But while still the merest child, the passion for learning seems to have taken possession of him, and so he came directly under the influence of the Church. From boyhood to the age of thirty he was a student of monastic culture, and penetrated the mystery of hereditary and actual sin by which man had incurred both the anger and the pity of the tremendous powers around him. So he gave up his life not only to winning the protection and forgiveness of these deities, but to spreading the knowledge of them among the Germans. His effectiveness and courage as a missionary were no doubt partly due to the talents which he had inherited from a line of administrators and adventurers. But he remained a recluse, conspicuous for that strain of almost feminine gentleness which rendered him the confidant of women. And yet his zeal, his capacity for action, his power of influencing others, all show that he was capable of playing a bigger and more universal part, that he might have bridged the gulf between the secular and monastic ideals, and have himself founded a new ideal. *Beowulf* typifies the older order.

As we have said, these two tendencies were to be blended in the eleventh century and were then to develop or rather were to diverge into a new and highly stimulating view of life by the end of the thirteenth. But such a consummation was beyond English civilisation in these earlier centuries so full of burning homesteads and falling dynasties. Now and then one meets with a hero who might in a happier time have combined

the two ideals. Such a one is perhaps Byrhtnoth who died on the battlefield at Maldon. His last prayer is almost in the spirit of Roland at Roncesvaux. And yet the poem as a whole belongs to an age before God had taught northern men's fingers to fight. *The Battle of Maldon* illustrates the ancient spirit of the *comitatus*, especially in Byrhtwold, and the heroism such as any pagan might display, but not the enthusiasm of epic Christianity. The warriors, strong in the true faith, do not first kneel down in prayer, then, exulting over the heathen, enter the battle, sure of eternal bliss whatever the issue. No doubt the memories of that battle were too bitter for such a mood. In fact the frequent defeats of the Christians may explain why the newer faith inspired no great epics. Minstrels may too often have been reminded of men such as Leofgar, bishop of Hereford, who, like Archbishop Turpin, put on armour and led an expedition against the Welsh king Griffin, only to meet with defeat and death<sup>1</sup>. But from the distance of the twentieth century we can detect among the men of the ninth and tenth centuries, indications which show the direction in which civilisation was moving. Such a man was Edgar who subdued the Scots, Cumbrians, Britons and Saxons, and attributed his power to God<sup>2</sup>. Another striking example is Cnut who at the head of fifty ships drove out King Olaf the Saint, who conquered Malcolm of Scotland and at one time claimed to be king of all England, Denmark, Norway and part of Sweden, and yet in his public proclamations professed the utmost submission to God, went to Rome to pray for his sins and the welfare of his empire, and burst into tears when entering a monastery, beating his breast and keeping his eyes fixed on the ground<sup>3</sup>. The career of King Alfred is even more significant. He was kept from monastic influences, he was not allowed to learn writing or reading till he was twelve years old. He was brought up on Old English poems till he had them by heart, and he was encouraged to make war and

<sup>1</sup> *Abingdon Chronicle*, Anno 1056.

<sup>2</sup> Charter to Ely. See R. W. Chambers, *England before the Norman Conquest*, p. 252.

<sup>3</sup> See *A.S. Chronicle*, D, Proclamation of 1020, Proclamation of 1027, *Encomium Emmae*, all quoted R. W. Chambers, *op. cit.* pp. 280-4.

hunting his chief pursuits. His upbringing reminds one of Theodoric's contempt for Latin schools, and the conviction that the child who dreaded the rod would never dare to face a sword<sup>1</sup>. In fact, when the Goths sacked Athens, they refrained from burning the libraries because "as long as the Greeks were addicted to the study of books, they would never apply themselves to the exercise of arms."<sup>2</sup> Yet King Alfred, though ravaged by an unknown disease, and involved in all the public anxieties of that troubrous time, was consumed with a passion for learning which he somehow managed to satisfy. Many others possessed by such desires had buried themselves in monasteries. Alfred might have done the same thing, as he was afflicted with sorrow and remorse at his ignorance of "divine wisdom" and the liberal arts. But instead of thus surrendering to one of these rival claims, he succeeded in administering his kingdom, fighting the Danes, studying Boethius and Orosius, and yet cultivating Old English songs to his dying day<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Procop. *Bell. Goth.* 1, 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Decline and Fall*, chap. x.

<sup>3</sup> Ascer, xxii, xxv, lxxvi, lxxvii (Stevenson's ed.).

## CHAPTER V

### THE UNION OF EPIC AND RELIGIOUS IDEALS

Politically, the Anglo-Saxon states solved the difficulty of this religious cleavage, by the formal adoption—and in some cases enforcement—of Christianity. How they would have solved the spiritual problem of a conflict of ideals we cannot tell, because the progress of their civilisation was cut short by the disasters of the ninth and tenth centuries. The history of races is like the so-called “beheading game” or one of those pacts into which Gawain entered with the Green Knight. Each nation enjoys for a period almost unlimited opportunity to expand and develop and then comes the day of reckoning. The civilisation which they have been free to evolve is subjected to a supreme test, and if there is any essential weakness or insincerity in its ideals, the nation sinks, if only for a few generations, below the march of events and some other race rises to the summit and has its chance. Who shall say whether at least one cause of the Anglo-Saxon collapse is not to be found in the failure (at least partial failure) of the warrior class to embrace the inner spirit of Christianity without losing the pride and stubbornness of paganism. At any rate such was the achievement of the Normans who took their place in the leadership of Western culture.

*I. The Normans settle in France. They reach a stage of civilisation suitable to rapid development just as Europe recovers from the dread of the Last Judgment Day at the beginning of the eleventh century.*

We do not yet really understand the origin of the adventurers who came from the Scandinavian seas and began in the eighth century to harry the coasts of England, Germany and France. Their movements southward are generally connected with the great sea fight of Hafsfjord in 872 when Harald the Fair-haired practically mastered Norway, and the remnants

of the warrior caste began to seek new homes in Iceland and elsewhere. At first they came only as freebooters, but they soon began to stay as conquerors. In 787 they made their first raid on England, but in 872 they not only conquered Angiers, but tried to retain their hold on the town. In 888, they laid siege to Paris and ravaged the neighbourhood. Neither Charles the Bold, Charles the Fat, nor Odo was strong enough to repel these invaders and each was glad enough to buy them off for a few years. Finally Charles the Simple in 918 ceded to Rollo and to his followers the whole of a province which they had already occupied in part and which, after them, was called Normandy.

Thus, like the Acheans and the Anglo-Saxons, the Normans after a period of strenuous victory were settling down to assimilate and enjoy the civilisation which they had conquered. At first it must have looked as though they would derive little but the purely material sweets of plunder from contact with the French. The empire of Charlemagne had fallen beyond recovery, and the elaborately constructed Carlovingian civilisation seemed to have disappeared with it among the calamities and massacres of the ensuing age. Even a jejune and passionless record such as Frodoard's chronicle shows that France, like most other countries of Europe, was passing through one of the most gloomy periods of her history. All this accumulated misery found expression in the firm belief that the end of the world was at hand.

In order to understand the significance of this expectation it must be remembered how deep-seated the idea was. Pagan sages divided the life of the universe into epochs and had agreed that one period was over and another about to begin, at about the time when Christ happened to be born<sup>1</sup>. The *Apocalypse* had prophesied that a series of disasters was to herald the almost immediate overthrow of the Roman Empire; the reign of the Messiah and of his martyrs was to begin and to last a thousand years, and that then Antichrist should be let loose, followed by the resurrection and the Last Judgment Day. St Augustin had concluded by elaborate calculations

<sup>1</sup> Boissier, *Fin du Paganisme*, iv, 3.

that the tyranny of Antichrist was to last a thousand years and had already begun by his time<sup>1</sup>. It was moreover believed that the world had endured for six thousand years, and that this period was the limit to its existence. Rabbis even convinced themselves of this likelihood by remembering that the Hebrew word for God has six letters; that the letter *m* is repeated six times in the first chapter of *Genesis*; that Enoch was translated after six generations; that the Lord created the world in six days. Besides these specific prognostications, the Israelites scattered over Asia Minor had begun to proselytise from about the second century onwards, and, wishing, possibly, to put the most impressive of their convictions in a form which their contemporaries would understand, had adopted the fiction of the Sibylline prophecies, to warn their contemporaries of the approaching end of the world<sup>2</sup>. At each crisis in the world's history these prognostications were renewed, but both St John and St Augustin gave authority for awaiting the beginning of the eleventh century with especial dread<sup>3</sup>. But when this dismal expectation for the year 1000 proved unfounded, Europe seemed to feel that a crushing burden had fallen from her shoulders and she returned with new strength and zest to the problems of this life<sup>4</sup>. The pirates so recently settled in the north of France did not remain uninfluenced by these events. No race was better fitted to play its part in the disorders of the tenth century and surviving records tell of their wildness and savagery. But there is something humanising about the possession of land, and by the third or fourth generation the descendants of these sea rovers were beginning to outgrow the ideals of their forefathers. At the same time they began to display their amazing gift for assimilating what was best in the manners and character of their neighbours. They even began to prefer French to their own language. Thus they were just beginning to awake to a

<sup>1</sup> *De Civ. Dei*, xx, xxii; *In Joan. Evangel. Tract.* xxvi, cxxiv.

<sup>2</sup> Boissier, *Fin du Paganisme*, iv, 3.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion see J. Roy, *L'An Mille*, 1885.

<sup>4</sup> For this new impulse to civilisation see *Rodulfi Glabri Cluniacensis monachi Historiarum sui Temporis Libri Quinque*, Lib. iii, cap. 4 (passage translated in *A Medieval Garner*, G. G. Coulton, 1910).

sense of progress and development, as Europe and especially France was caught in the renascence of the eleventh century.

ii. *The Normans gain immensely in cohesion and community of interests by the institution of feudalism. They cultivate Christianity with eagerness. Thanks to the menace of Islam these formerly conflicting tendencies are united under Charlemagne.*

One of the first things that the settlers learnt so readily was to exchange the ancient Teutonic obligations of the king and his *comitatus* for another institution more suited to their conditions. In the midst of a society based on land tenure but disturbed by every form of violence, the men who possessed isolated estates found themselves exposed to so many dangers that they were glad enough to seek the protection of some powerful neighbour. They secured his alliance by the fictitious cession of their property. Their champion returned it to his dependent, not as *alleu*, but as *bénéfice*, that is to say not free from taxes and burdens, *ne relevant que du soleil*, but as a charge involving military service and other contributions. Such was the price paid for protection. Before long, all land was held either as a *fief* or a *bénéfice*, and thus a vast nexus of mutual obligation united the nobility and gentry. Almost every one above the rank of *serf*, *mainmortable* and *vilain* might act in the double capacity of suzerain and vassal. The king of France himself was vassal to the abbé of St Denis, so was the duke of Burgundy to the bishop of Langres. Thirty-two *chevaliers bannerets* owed homage and service to the vicomte de Thouars, who himself owed both to the count of Anjou, the vassal to the king of France<sup>1</sup>. The system extended to the Church. In order that the immense lands possessed by some monasteries might be defended from pillage and robbery, they were entrusted to secular warriors, and the *avoués* of this or that religious house held them in fief as vassals. It need not be pointed out that this complicated arrangement not only led occasionally to disconcerting legal and constitutional anomalies, but did little to curb the avarice and tyranny of men. Nevertheless feudal interdependence brought with it a hint of unity and of

<sup>1</sup> Duruy, *Hist. de la France*, chap. xviii.

fellowship undreamt of before. Now that every free man was bound to choose some lord with whom to exchange services, a certain sense of discipline was brought into a society still prone to claim a savage's freedom of action. All but serfs and villains must feel themselves associated in a confederacy in which they might play the double part of servant and master. Such was the hope and purpose of Charlemagne, when he introduced the elements of the system, and such might at any time be the effect of feudalism, if some great impulse or emotion could put life into it. There existed already a certain political unity. It needed as cement the unity of ideas.

This spiritual influence came with Christianity. When Rollo exacted his broad lands from the French king, he had of course gone through the usual formalities. He had pronounced himself to be Charles's vassal; he had accepted the monarch's daughter in marriage; and he had allowed himself to be baptised. Three or four generations later, his people were, of their own accord, embracing the faith with the utmost fervour. It must be remembered that even during the darkest periods of the tenth century, the Church had been gathering strength. St Mayeul, abbé of Cluny, had reformed the abbey of St Denis; St Dunstan had brought new life and discipline into the English Church; Adalbérón, though the son of the duke of Lorraine and nephew of Hugues Capet, had taken a monk's vows and had risen to be bishop of Metz; St Cadroé, though descended from Scottish kings, had become abbé of Vaussez, and had joined with Adalbérón in reforming the abbeys of the north-east of France; St Romuald had founded his order at Camalodoli by 1012. So now in the eleventh century, when hope and enthusiasm returned, the Normans were bound to find in the Church one of their chief fields of activity. At first it must have looked as if a large part of the nation, in its eagerness for culture and progress, was preparing to abjure the traditions of its warlike past. Young men were so ready to give up their lives to the peaceful and self-effacing service of God that abbeys and monasteries sprang up or were restored at Fontenelle, Jumièges, Caen, Rouen, d'Avranches, Bayeux, Fécamp, St Michel. Many houses had been founded

or endowed in the previous years of guilty terror, *appropinquante mundi termino*. Behind their walls the youth of the next few generations acquired and developed the culture which is associated with the names of Richer, William of Jumièges, Lanfranc, Herlouin and Anselm.

When the most intelligent and enthusiastic part of any community lets itself be thus absorbed in matters of the mind or spirit, it not only parts company with its simple ideals and single-heartedness, but its direct influence is generally lost to others. More often than not, such men tend to refine and differentiate their ideas, till all their thoughts and their animosities are absorbed by distinctions and hypotheses beyond the comprehension of the uninitiated. At best, they are liable to become a community within the community, respected and perhaps feared—or even worshipped by the common folk—but not assimilated. Such had been the fate of the Anglo-Saxon Church with regard to its warrior caste, and such was the direction in which the Norman religious revival might have moved. In fact we find much energy and passion diverted into abstruse controversies, and the disputatious spirit, which in the ninth century had filled Gotteschalk, Rabanus Maurus, Hincmar, and John Scot Erigena, began to rouse the ecclesiastics of the eleventh<sup>1</sup>. In 1022 thirteen heretics were condemned to death. From 1050 to 1080 Bérenger de Tours divided the Church and provoked the formidable opposition of Lanfranc by maintaining, as did John Scot Erigena, that the eucharist was merely a symbol. Towards 1085 Roscelin attempted to rationalise the doctrine of the Trinity and involved himself with Anselm in the subtleties of *realism* and *nominalism*. It is easy to exaggerate the evil of such tendencies. At their worst, they mark the beginning of the worship of the intellect, and show that men were invoking the power of thought against their ghostly enemies. But they also mark the divergence of ecclesiastical from secular life. If such tendencies had been allowed to develop unchecked, the Norman Church might have given to the world at large some new ideas on architecture, medicine, and

<sup>1</sup> *Post*, chap. x, § 2.

agriculture, together with a sense of history and perhaps a taste for music and calligraphy, but nothing more. The grand emotions of religion would never have reached the laity. Inspiration and divine enthusiasm would have been jealously guarded within the hierarchy of ecclesiasticism; a sacred flame as difficult to approach and to win as the rose in Jean de Lorris's mystic garden.

Eventually the influence of the Church became thus restricted and turned inwardly upon itself. But at the beginning of the eleventh century circumstances favoured expansiveness, and we find that the worship of God brings new life and unity into feudalism and even transforms the warrior caste. It was the first French pope, Sylvester II, who saw most clearly the great need of the time. While still a mere monk of Aurillac, named Gerbert, he had given himself up to the study of physics and science and had even travelled to Spain in order to learn algebra and astronomy from the Arabs. Thus his early career was not dissimilar to that of so many other devout men of his age and he might have been expected, like them, to flee all thoughts of war and to devote his maturer manhood to private austerities, or theological research, or to labours in the missionary field. Instead of any such peaceful and self-effacing pursuits, one of his first acts as pope was to call on all Christians to arm themselves and rescue Jerusalem. We can never account for all the motives which led this or any other man to any particular line of action, but Sylvester II may well be credited with enough insight to see the wisdom of rousing the warlike instincts of the nobility in the service of God.

The scanty records, but by no means scanty traditions, of the past must have taught any thoughtful man of that time that what held together and ennobled the jarring elements of early Christian Europe, was the menace of the paynims. What are the barest facts of the great invasion which in the eighth century united continental Christendom against the Saracens? Mahomet died in 632. By 639 Abubeker his successor had overrun Syria and Amrou, his lieutenant, had conquered Egypt. In two generations, from 647 to 698, the Saracens won their way to the Pillars of Hercules. In 710

Musa crossed into Spain and within two years Mahomedan influence was supreme to the foot of the Pyrenees. Early in the eighth century they began to invade France and so fought their way into the heart of Europe. These prodigious conquests had been achieved so rapidly and consolidated so thoroughly, partly because the fighting instinct had been combined with religious enthusiasm. It must have looked as if all western civilisation would fall into the power of Islam. But though early Christianity imposed a spirit of peace and humility, at this crisis it filled its votaries with extraordinary valiance and aggressiveness. The Church and the warrior caste seem to have embraced each other's virtues and the union of temporal with spiritual power proved irresistible. Charles Martel at the head of northern chivalry met these unconquered armies between Tours and Poictiers in 732 and, after a crushing victory, drove back the remnants to Spain. Charlemagne afterwards wrested from them the territory between the Pyrenees and the Ebro, henceforth to be called the Spanish March.

III. *The blending of religious and martial interests was not entirely extinguished by the disasters after Charlemagne's death. So the religious expansion of the eleventh century and the cult of relics culminated in the age of the Crusades.*

Thus Charlemagne stood out as the last and most glorious representative of a double movement. Not only had victories been won and a great empire established, but the spiritual and temporal powers had joined hands and in this alliance each had grown infinitely more magnificent and impressive. This consummation was already beginning to give birth to a new spirit in literature. As we have seen, the inevitable tendency of early Christian culture was to subserve the Church, and eschew everything which did not redound to its honour. Other interests were rigorously subordinated to this end. If classical prosody and style were ever to be cultivated, it must be solely to compose metrical paraphrases of the Bible, such as the *Evangeliorum Libri IV* of Juvencus. If pagan mythology occupied your thoughts, you must use it to allegorise Christianity as did Prudentius in *Psychomachia*. Both heathen stories and

heathen language are employed in the versified lives of the saints such as Arator's *De Actibus Apostolorum*, Venantius Fortunatus's *Vita Martini* or the half-lyrical half-narrative *Peristephanon* of Prudentius. Owing to the Byzantine wars and Lombard invasion, we shall never know how these tendencies might have developed, but when Charlemagne had begun to restore order, and to build up modern Europe, we find that literature is striking out in a new line. Culture is still largely ecclesiastical, being inspired by Paulus Diaconus and by Alcuin, who has himself contributed to the "Christian Epic" *Vita Sancti Willibrordi* and *De Sanctis Eboracensis Ecclesiae*. And, on the other hand, the old pagan epics must have still enjoyed popularity, since the emperor took pains to collect them<sup>1</sup>. But Latin, the language of the Church and the monastery, is now being used also to celebrate purely secular and warlike achievements. We find *Versus ad Karolum Imperatorem*, *Carmen de Carolo Magno*, and even some purely popular and lyrical outbursts on such themes as the death of one of Charles's generals, the fall of Aquileia, and Pepin's victory over the Avars. The age is producing a literature for the laity as well as one for the Church, and both seem to be inspired by a common spirit. This expansion was partly due to the influence of clerics. Their presence was felt in all the important affairs of the nation. No *roi fainéant* would choose or would dare to be without his priestly councillor, while the abbeys of Marmoutier, St Bertin, St Denis, and St Germain des Prés produced the most enlightened records of contemporary events<sup>2</sup>. The secularisation of the Church was accompanied by the clericalising of the laity. Charlemagne instituted schools, which the sons of noblemen were compelled to attend, and arranged that the fiery young warriors of the next generation should be taught by ecclesiastics. As the great ruler himself declared, it is needful to know the right before we can do it, and the mind will more fully grasp its duty if the tongue is perfected in the service of God<sup>3</sup>. So one of his capitularies

<sup>1</sup> Eginhard, *Vit. Car. Mag.* xxix.

<sup>2</sup> Neander, *Kirchengeschichte*; Montalembert, *Moines d'Occident*.

<sup>3</sup> *Admonitio Generalis* to Archbishops, Bishops and Abbots of his realm.

insisted *ut unus quisque filium suum litteras ad discendum mittat, et ibi cum omni sollicitudine permaneat usque dum bene instructus perveniat*<sup>1</sup>.

Many causes contributed to the dismemberment of Europe after Charlemagne's death, but this disintegration might still have been delayed or even arrested by the unifying influence of some religious enthusiasm. Unfortunately the successors of the great emperor were absorbed by other less inspiring cares, and failed to preserve the alliance between Church and State. It is a significant omission in their policy that none of them enforced the attendance of the young noblemen at the schools which Charlemagne had instituted, and it is probable that the ensuing decadence was partly due to the divorce of the ruling class from religiously inspired education. Secular and heroic poetry also languished. Yet it is noticeable that the movement once started did not utterly die out. We hear no more of pagan and vernacular lays<sup>2</sup>, but Latinised and devotional heroics just survive. Walafrid Strabo composed *De Imagine Tetrici* and Ernoldus Nigellus composed *De Gestis Caesaris*, both in honour of Louis the Pious. Between 888 and 891 Poeta Saxo versified Eginhard's prose *Vita Caroli Magni* and during the same period Abbo compiled a record of the Normans' siege of Paris, *De Bellis Parisiaca Urbis*. Thus the tradition survived till the beginning of the tenth century, when *Gesta Berengarii Imperatoris* bore witness that a revival of national culture might not be far off.

The Crusade which Sylvester II preached in 999-1001 did not take place till 1095-1099 but the attitude of the pope is profoundly significant. He gathered up the broken threads of Charlemagne's statescraft. He saw that Europe did not need another revolution; it needed a new motive, a fresh inspiration for all concerned in the business of war. How far he foresaw the influence on feudalism of the early Crusades, cannot of course be calculated; but it is not likely that the man who travelled to Spain to study algebra and invented a new way of measuring time was actuated solely by what we should now call excessive piety. He must also have perceived that there

<sup>1</sup> Hauck, II, 236, n. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Chadwick, *The Heroic Age*, chap. I, p. 6.

was no hope of progress then, as now, without a governing idea. The spirit of *Diex li volt* was to be developed into an ideal for the battlefield.

The events of the eleventh century made these hopes possible. The consummation was not so rapid or complete as Sylvester II may well have wished, but it was none the less inevitable, and the Normans played therein a leading part. It was over the relics of saints that the priest and the warrior once more joined hands. Now that the kingdom of Heaven was being re-established on earth, the ever-growing multitude of converts began to study and revive the ancient enthusiasms. None proved more contagious than the practice of making pilgrimages<sup>1</sup>. As early as 269, under the pontificate of St Felix, the eucharistic sacrifice had been celebrated on the tomb of a fallen martyr, and henceforth this usage became part of the liturgy. When possible, a basilica was raised over the burial place of every saint. From the first there had been the greatest eagerness to collect any relics of a martyr, as when Polycarp's disciples in A.D. 155 gathered the ashes of their murdered master *τημιώτερα λίθων πολυτελῶν καὶ δοκιμώτερα ὑπὲρ χρυσῶν*<sup>2</sup>. Then it was considered indispensable that relics should be placed under the altar of every church that was to be consecrated. Soon afterwards they were required at each door and then in the diptychs on the walls. So by the fourth century the cult of relics was firmly established in the Primitive Church. Every place in the Holy Land, hallowed by the presence of Christ, was visited again and again; the catacombs of Rome were ransacked for *tantillae reliquiae*, and besides the rescuing of some souvenir of a martyr newly slain or the discovery of some remnant of one long dead, there was occasion, after the period of persecutions, for removals and reinstallations with pomp and circumstance. Bishop Gregory's father carried the ashes of some saint in a golden locket round his neck, bequeathing the precious relic to his wife and she

<sup>1</sup> See Guibert de Nogent, *Treatise on Relics*, and *God's Dealings through the Franks*; B. Monod, *Le Moine Guibert*, 1905.

<sup>2</sup> Contemporary account (?), reproduced in Loeb Classics, *Apost. Fathers*, vol. II.

handed it on to her son, the historian of the Franks<sup>1</sup>. Gibbon has remarked that “the Christians of the seventh century had insensibly relapsed into a semblance of Paganism; their public and private vows were addressed to the relics and images that disgraced the temples of the East<sup>2</sup>,” and in 754 the synod of Constantinople decreed “that all visible symbols of Christ, except in the eucharist, were either blasphemous or heretical.” But the cult continued to spread, especially in the West. It was useless for Alcuin to condemn such practices as *in sacculis portare ossa*, or *in pittaciolis exaratas in collo circumferre*, and to argue that it is better to imitate the examples of the saints and bear in mind the admonitions of the evangelists<sup>3</sup>. Men felt that they were imitating the example of those two privileged mortals who first visited Christ’s tomb on the morning of Resurrection day, and at the same time they were satisfying one of the most deeply rooted of human superstitions, the belief in charms and luck bones. No wonder then that in the religious renascence of the eleventh century, the search for relics revived with enthusiasm. So widespread was the desire to make a pilgrimage that the pious did not wait till there was a chance of discovering or removing some sacred object. Whenever the forgotten burial place of a saint was located, a monastery or abbey arose over the tomb and people journeyed from far to view the blessed relics and to receive their life-giving and purifying influence. Such was their enthusiasm that the more zealous did not confine themselves to the distant corners of their own land, but accomplished pilgrimages as far as Galicia and Rome. Then the more adventurous began to journey to Jerusalem.

We have already seen in Bede’s *Historia* that the Anglo-Saxons of the eighth century were fully alive to what spiritual profit might be gained by viewing the relics of some holy man<sup>4</sup>. But there is a fundamental difference between those pilgrimages and the journeys made on the continent in the eleventh century. Radulphus Glaber has well brought out the distinction in his chronicle, which extends from 900 to 1046. He says

<sup>1</sup> *Lib. Primus Mirac.* LXXXIV.

<sup>2</sup> *Decline and Fall*, chap. XLIX.

<sup>3</sup> *Ep.* ccxc (ccxix).

<sup>4</sup> *Ante*, chap. III, § 1.

*Ex universo orbe tam innumerabilis multitudo coepit confluere ad sepulcrum Salvatoris Hierosolymis, quantum nullus hominum prius sperare poterat: primitus enim ordo inferioris plebis; deinde vero mediocres; post haec permaximi quique reges, et comites et praesules<sup>1</sup>.* The mighty ones had taken up God's cause. Heretofore Christianity had exercised most influence over the humble-minded and whenever a king or a nobleman had been unable to resist the call, he had generally shed his worldly power like so much dross. So Carloman had laid aside the cares of kingship, assumed a monk's dress and built a monastery on Soracte, *amore conversationis contemplativae succensus<sup>2</sup>*, and as late as the eleventh century Helgaud could admiringly represent King Robert more as a monk or father confessor than as a leader of men. Moreover there were still to be found people old fashioned enough to shake their heads over this movement eastward, and to declare that the Antichrist was every year to be expected from that direction and that these enthusiasts were but hastening thither to prepare a way for him<sup>3</sup>. But all the time a new spirit was springing up born of religious enthusiasm and national pride. Men called to mind the position of our Lord when crucified—*veracissimus praesagii index fuit constitutio illa crucis Dominicae*. Behind Him were the savage pagan hordes of the East; His eyes were turned towards the West and shed on those regions the light of Truth. His right arm pointed to the North which was therefore ready to embrace the Gospel, while the barbarous and unruly tribes of the South were indicated by His left hand<sup>4</sup>. The tendencies which found expression in this symbolism seem to have come to a head in 1033. In that year the Saracens had been pressing more heavily than usual on the Christian communities in Africa. So the laymen gathered together and resolved to face their formidable oppressors, trusting in the intervention of the Virgin and the assistance of St Peter. They achieved an overwhelming victory and in fulfilment of a vow they dedicated to the abbey of Cluny all the spoils that they won<sup>5</sup>. From that time onwards the warriors of this world were able to fall under the spell of

<sup>1</sup> Lib. iv, cap. 6.<sup>3</sup> Glaber, iv, 6.<sup>2</sup> Eginhard, *Vit. Car. Mag.* ii.<sup>4</sup> Glaber, i, 5.<sup>5</sup> Glaber, iv, 7.

the Church without sacrificing their station or traditions, and none obeyed this new call more brilliantly than the Normans<sup>1</sup>.

While England was just recovering from the conflict between the Danish and Saxon dynasties, her future conquerors were proving on the frontiers of Christendom what kind of spirit the new type of pilgrim might harbour. In 1016 a band of them visited the Roman tombs and were engaged by the pope to defend Benevento from the Greeks. In 1035 Robert the Magnificent headed another party on an expedition to Jerusalem. The leader died at Nicea, but some of his followers, on returning to Italy, found Salernum besieged by the Saracens and drove the heathen out of the province. The prospect of capturing booty and winning Heaven by chastising the enemies of God appealed to that blend of freebooter and romantic in every Norman, and before long so many crusading adventurers were swarming in South Italy, that Leo IX marched against them with an army of Germans. In 1053 they captured the pontiff, then knelt before their prisoner and received from him in fief the duchy of Apulia which they had already conquered. Some of the most daring of the Normans followed Roger de Toesny into Spain. Between 1057 and 1061, Robert Guiscard captured Calabria, Salernum, Benevento and even invaded Greece with the intention of overthrowing the Eastern Empire. Roger, his younger brother, actually wrested Sicily from the Moslem. Wars had often, before, been waged in the name of religion and with no less success, but these, as we shall now see, produced a spirit unique in the history of culture.

This spirit soon found its peculiar type. The ancient national hero of the Franks was Sifrit. He was a warrior of truly super-human achievements; renowned for his adventures among dwarves no less than as a slayer of monsters, and conspicuous for his tragic death as well as for the untold treasure of which he possessed the secret. We have already seen<sup>2</sup> how his fame spread through Northern Europe, but meanwhile he lost ground in his own country. The Franks and Normans had found a new and more Christian ideal in Charlemagne and Roland.

<sup>1</sup> For early history of Normans see *L'Ystoire de Li Normant* and *La Chronique de Robert Viscart*, both reprinted in *Soc. de l'Hist. de Fr.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, chap. II, § 7.

## CHAPTER VI

### *CHANSON DE ROLAND*

WE have seen, in the last chapter, that the Normans surrendered themselves to religious zeal without sacrificing their passion for war. The laymen were as enthusiastic for the Church as the clergy. Both classes hoped and expected to win eternal life by serving the same cause; but in different ways. While the monastery-bred scholars debated on the problems of original sin or on the doctrines of the eucharist and of the Trinity, the warriors gratified at the same time their devout piety and their natural ferocity by winning fame and plunder from the enemies of God, as well as a place in Heaven for themselves. Such ideals now seem to us so incompatible that we are inclined to take seriously the more self-interested of the two pursuits and to regard the other as a satisfying method of self-persuasion. Yet Norman idealism apparently succeeded in reconciling these conflicting claims. At any rate such is the true significance of the *Chanson de Roland*.

1. *The sources and origin of the Chanson are doubtful, but its tone is unmistakeable. Apart from its peculiar spirit, the poem has the usual epic touches; an intense admiration for wealth, beauty and strength.*

According to the well-known and long established views of Gaston Paris and Léon Gautier, the poem, as we have it, is a late eleventh-century version of a late tenth-century re-creation of *Cantilena* which had existed from the time of Charlemagne onwards. But Prof. Boissonade<sup>1</sup> now concludes that there is no proof of these *Cantilena* having existed, and argues that the poem is the original work of one man of genius, inspired not by the memory or tradition of Charlemagne, but by the battles between the French and the Saracens. For this reason, while Gautier puts the date of recension between 1066-90, Prof. Boissonade maintains that it was first composed 1120-5

<sup>1</sup> *Du Nouveau sur la Chanson de Roland*, Paris.

and is convinced that Roland, Olivier, Ganelon and Charlemagne are idealised portraits of early twelfth-century warriors. Gautier believes that the author was a jongleur who accompanied William the Conqueror to Britain. Prof. Boissonade contends that the author was the mysterious Tuoldus mentioned at the end of the poem, but supposes him to be a monk of that name, who in 1128 served in an old mosque converted into a church near Saragossa. He explains in other ways the poem's supposed connection (through internal evidence) with Mont St Michel near Avranches in Lower Normandy, but he does not deny that its author was a Norman.

The rival claims of these two theories can never be settled, beyond any possibility of question. Even if certainty were obtainable, the whole compass of this volume would be needed to examine and sift Prof. Boissonade's immense accumulation of learning. Fortunately for an inquiry such as the present, the actual date or authorship of the poem is not of supreme importance. It is more essential to realise what type of civilisation, what phase of progress, what dream of power and victory this or any other particular epic illustrates. It is the age or the epoch which is the real author of the *Chanson de geste*. In the case of this poem, the atmosphere and tone are unmistakable; we shall see that they are unlike the spirit of any narrative which we have yet considered; we shall also see that their inspiration seems to have been the product of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. But we can never know how far the poet who gave them unique expression was relying on tradition or on his own inventiveness. On the whole, the theories of Paris and Gautier seem more convincing because the narrative contains traces of uncivilised coarseness, beneath its chivalrous enthusiasm. Yet these touches of vulgarity may be the additions of later hands, not the relics of earlier ones, because the earliest and most reliable ms. of the *Chanson* which we possess is a hurriedly written, insignificant pocket libretto, which some one wrote out towards the end of the twelfth century, for the use of travelling minstrels. These performers probably took up their stand in the market place of every town on their route, and after attracting a crowd with a few tumbles or

juggling feats, they began to recite a selected scene, taking parts in the dialogue and the single speeches, as if they were actors in some primitive play, and conducting the whole performance to the accompaniment of the *zyel*. So the *Chanson* may have reached us only in the third stage of its development, not as a sustained epic, composed for the delight of castles and of beer halls, but as a popularisation, re-edited and recast into scenes, an adaptation to pleasure the *bourgeoisie*. There is certainly a lack of intimate character drawing, and one can hardly be blind to what looks like the insertion of stereotyped descriptions, especially in battles. Besides, though all epic poetry endows its heroes with superhuman strength, in the *Chanson* the exaggeration seems too gross for an audience whose profession was arms. Amongst other impossibilities, Charlemagne is fifteen feet high and two hundred years old; Turpin when wounded to death totters to his feet and deals more than a thousand blows before expiring. With so much doubt surrounding the authorship of the poem, it is useless to discuss whether the poet was a jongleur under William the Conqueror or a priest under Louis VI. Whatever the origin of the composition, its spirit is the spirit of the Normans in their wars with the Saracens.

When we turn to the poem itself, we notice the features common to all the poems that have caught the spirit of action. The chief characters are warriors who have a passion for fame. They have an intense admiration for armour and equipment. When Charlemagne arms himself for battle, the poet dwells reverently on each stage of the ceremony till the emperor has mounted Tencendur and is galloping in front of a hundred thousand men. All the paladins have golden spurs and brilliantly painted shields and crested helmets and call their swords by names. As we have noticed in previous epics, so in the *Chanson* we find a profound interest in wealth. The ransom which King Massile pays to Charlemagne amounts to seven hundred camels carrying gold and silver. When the emir's fleet sailed along the Mediterranean, the masts were studded with rubies, and fitted with lanterns which made the night sea glitter. Nor need this lavish splendour be ascribed

to pure—and as we should now say childish—inventiveness. The poet exaggerates, in the true epic spirit, but contact with oriental civilisation was probably in reality a source of wonderment to the northerners. Joinville describes how before Damietta, the sultan's golden arms flashed in the sun, and recalls with amazement the crystal and amber statuettes, riveted with pure gold, which “The Old Man of the Mountain” presented to St Louis. Besides admiring magnificence, the audiences of the *Chanson*, or at any rate its poet, had like Homer a sense of human beauty. Among the French heroes, even Ganelon is handsome, although he is the villain of the piece<sup>1</sup>. Even their enemies are superb. “The emir is gigantic with huge limbs. His chest is strong, his body well-formed and beautiful. His shoulders are vast and his glance is straight and clear. His expression is haughty and his locks are curled. He seems to be as white as a flower in summer.”<sup>2</sup>

As we have seen in the case of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf*, this delight in beauty, riches, strength and craftsmanship is not the true epic spirit but is perhaps its most reliable sign or at any rate accompaniment. One of the best examples of the capacity to admire will be found in this poem, as in so many others of a kindred theme, in the description of an army marching out to battle: “Vast is the plain, with the country flung wide around it, and mighty is the army that musters there! See the helmets gleam, covered with gold and precious stones. See the brightness of those shields, edged with the goldsmith's work; those spears and pennants attached to the lances. Do you hear those clear-voiced trumpets and above all the long drawn out blast of the horn?”<sup>3</sup>

II. *The promise of death to a Norman warrior. The characters of Charlemagne, Turpin and Roland. Signs of sensibility and humanism.*

Many more passages might be quoted which remind the reader of earlier epics, and of heroes who (whatever the historical truth) seem to engage in battle or adventure for wealth and fame. What were the motives of the Norman

<sup>1</sup> See ll. 304 ff. and 3762 ff.

<sup>2</sup> ll. 3149 ff.

<sup>3</sup> ll. 3305 ff.

warrior? He was certainly attracted by the hopes of booty and of honour, when he joined in this four-century old feud against the fiery enemies of the South. In addition, many of them must have found their imaginations to be strangely fired by glimpses of desert life and by relics of the oriental and barbaric splendour which these enemies had won in distant countries. Besides, some at least must have been filled with new thoughts, as they viewed the sunny and many-coloured lands of the Mediterranean, still reminiscent of classical civilisation, which they were now for the first time exploring, either to conquer or to defend. The earlier invaders, or rather their epic poets, might just as well have felt the inspiration of such a life in such surroundings, but the Normans won something else in the South. By laying down their lives, they gained immortality. The anonymous chronicler of the First Crusade, in the middle of his soldier-like narrative, has defined the new attitude in his peculiarly matter-of-fact way. *Fuerunt in illa die martirizati ex nostris militibus seu peditibus plus quam mille, qui, ut credimus, in celum ascenderunt et candidati stolam martirii receperunt*<sup>1</sup>. Never were heroes so blessed in their warfare. An early Crusader won all the joys of this life—fame, wealth, the possession of fine horses and beautiful equipment—and assured felicity in the life to come.

The doubts which troubled the Northumbrian *optimas*, had been, for the time, completely set at rest. An explanation had been found which equally satisfied the old and the new. Whether you believed that the true and omnipotent God required some signal sacrifice to appease His just anger, or if you still liked to think of the Valkyrie, carrying to Valhal the soul of the warrior, whose corpse lay dead on the battlefield—in either case the Norman faith would give you heart for battle. It is such confidence in the next world as well as in this, which gives the *Chanson de Roland* its grandeur and loftiness of spirit. The warriors are elevated and ennobled by the greatness of their reward; they are rendered almost divine while still on earth. This blessedness fills them with yet another and higher

<sup>1</sup> *Gesta Frankorum et aliorum Hierosolimatariorum. Narratio septima, i.e. siege of Antioch. Ambush of Turks, 6 March, 1098.*

motive for war: gratitude and subservience to God. In fact this service constitutes the last and highest degree of feudalism. They had, in some sense, consecrated themselves vassals of God. Their prowess and fame on earth, and even their prospect of joy in Heaven, were a kind of possession held in fief, and in return they were prepared to face without quailing the heaviest odds.

Such is the atmosphere which epic warriors can breathe. Compare its vitalising power with the spirit of the best Icelandic sagas. Take the really great figure of Thorgisl, who probably represents the eleventh century, though his story has come down to us in a thirteenth-century version. Thorgisl is an explorer and adventurer; a warrior so formidable that few durst thwart him. But the qualities we are expected chiefly to admire are his patience and hopefulness. His greatest enemy is Thor, who threatens him in dreams<sup>1</sup>. His greatest trouble, when he lost his son<sup>2</sup>. His greatest feat, when he saved his crew from the dishonour and degradation of drinking bilge and urine<sup>3</sup>. Though famous for what he achieved, his narrator is equally impressed by the conflicts which he avoided, through self-restraint and good counsel. No one will deny that this story, like the sagas in general, far surpasses the *Chanson de Roland* in humanity, sub-servience and a sense of tragedy. They all display a deeper insight into the complexities of human nature. But their heroes do not, like the feudal knights, perceive how human beings can grow to the stature of divine grandeur, while pursuing the ideals of this world.

The reader must bear in mind this exaltation before he condemns Roland for not sounding his horn. The true reason would be so readily divined by an eleventh-century audience that the poet does not need explicitly to state it. His hearers would at once realise that in this romantically religious atmosphere, a warrior owed some great act of heroism to his God, and besides they would be convinced that Christians backed by their deity were more than a match for the most overwhelming horde of paynims<sup>4</sup>. Even the cautious and

<sup>1</sup> *Thorgislasaga*, III, 1; IV, 2, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* V, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* VII, 2.

<sup>4</sup> See ll. 1005-16, 1049-92.

statesmanlike Olivier redeems his lapse into prudence, by the reckless enthusiasm of his fighting, when the Saracens launch their attack. Besides, an earthly victory leading to an honoured old age was no consummation to these heroic careers; the Christian soldier no less than the pagan warrior had to pass through the gateway of death, before he reached in Paradise the last and crowning honour to which he was entitled. That is why the character of Archbishop Turpin is so significant. In some sort, he typifies and embodies this confidence and pride in immortality. So he is a formidable warrior, almost as irresistible in the field as Roland himself, and when the poet has introduced Abisme, the one repulsive figure in the whole poem because the representative of heathendom, it is the priest who attacks him<sup>1</sup>. But the unique quality of the archbishop is his power to promise future life and to calm the last moments of each warrior with the sure and certain hope of Paradise. His own ending is both heroic and saintly. He faints from his own wounds while bringing water to the wounded Roland and dies praying for Heaven and confessing his sins<sup>2</sup>.

Roland is the most purely human character in the poem, yet to us he seems to be drawn with so much more sympathy and insight that he fills the whole scene. How could it be otherwise? For Roland is a study of the secular warrior refined and exalted in the flame of Christianity. The poem is not without its touches of primitive coarseness, and its recollections of northern sagas, but on the battlefield this warrior has sloughed all such dross of earth. Late in the day, when in spite of prodigies of valour the hero realises that even if he routs the enemy, they have yet gained their end, since the rearguard is annihilated, he repents of his over-confidence. But his disillusionment is not meant to be shared by his audience; it is a sign of Roland's modesty. Massile and his eleven chieftains are allowed to indulge in the kind of "gabs" which were once so characteristic of northern poetry, and which are perhaps ridiculed and in the end justified in *Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*, but Roland, on the threshold of Heaven, is purged of earthly pride. His mood is also partly inspired by

<sup>1</sup> ll. 1631 ff.

<sup>2</sup> ll. 2222 ff.

horror at the carnage of war, for these Norman heroes have all the old Homeric loathing for the shambles of battle<sup>1</sup>. Roland bursts into tears and utters one of the noblest speeches in the poem when he contemplates the corpses of all those who had so gallantly served the emperor, and who were now lost to France<sup>2</sup>. He faints at the thought of what the approaching death of Olivier means for his country<sup>3</sup> and when his dying friend unwittingly strikes him, he has the self-control and generosity not to retaliate<sup>4</sup>. As his own death draws nigh, he reviews his life, but not in the old boastful spirit of paganism. It is the poet's device for reminding you of all the countries which he has won over to Christianity. With a similar import, he addresses his sword. This weapon has often figured in northern epic poetry as something almost divine. In *Helgakvitha Hjorvarthssonar*<sup>5</sup> the Valkyrie tells Helgi of a brand hidden in Sigarsholm, carved with magic runes and with snakes. The hilt has fame, the haft courage, the point has fear and it shines with gold. Durandal is just as pregnant with superhuman power, but the poet need no longer look to the charms engraved on the blade. Instead of heathen traceries the poet recounts the priceless relics enshrined in its hilt. These were the spiritual treasures which the Normans went to seek in Italy and in the Holy Land. As we have seen<sup>6</sup>, they were tokens that divine influence was strengthening and guiding them, not through a life of ghostly trials and carnal mortification, but through the joys and triumphs of this world to the greater triumphs and joys beyond. Then he composes himself to die, and his attitude betokens the devoutness of a Christian, and though on the battlefield he is confident and ruthless, his last prayer to God shows deep humility and a profound sense of sin. Raphael, Michael and Gabriel carry his soul to Paradise<sup>7</sup>.

Charlemagne represents the same ideal, but in a man who has lived longer and was therefore more holy, and who was

<sup>1</sup> E.g. passages beginning ll. 1401, 1421, 1622.

<sup>2</sup> ll. 1854-68.

<sup>3</sup> l. 1988.

<sup>4</sup> l. 1994.

<sup>5</sup> II, viii, ix. See also A. Olrik, *Danmarks Heltedigtning*, chap. vii, § 4, for part played in Icelandic legends by the sword "skøfnung."

<sup>6</sup> *Ante*, chap. v, § 3.

<sup>7</sup> ll. 237-506.

more highly placed and so even more favoured of God. His wondrous sword *Giôrîse* or *Joiuse* contains more precious relics in its hilt, even the spearhead which pierced Christ<sup>1</sup>. Gabriel is his guardian angel and succours him at the height of battle. Special dreams are vouchsafed to enlighten his mind with more than human wisdom<sup>2</sup>. When he desires to continue the pursuit of the Saracens, daylight is prolonged by a special miracle accorded to no other warrior except Joshua. Otherwise he is as devout and as humble-minded as are his paladins. Before the final battle with the emir, he dismounts, prostrates himself and prays to God, confessing his sins and citing scripture. Then he mounts again and firmly bestrides his steed with a radiant countenance<sup>3</sup>.

This religious fervour could not have possessed men's minds and have worked such wonders with their self-knowledge and self-judgment, without refining and elevating them in other ways. Of course the characters in the poem are not meant to reproduce and describe men as they really are. Charlemagne, Turpin, Roland and Olivier are ideals. But ideals are pictures of what men wish even if they do not hope to become; they illustrate and exemplify the highest that a generation can imagine. An epoch which could understand and appreciate such devotionalism in the heat of battle, and could admire the repression of animal instincts and heathen traditions of savagery, must have had its eyes open to other refinements of the spirit. Unhappily the poem, as we have it, exists in too rough and popular a form to do full justice to the culture of feudal Christianity. We can recognise the epic spirit, surviving even in this rather debased form, but an aristocratic grace and touch of individuality were either never added to the poem, in any stage of its evolution, or else have fallen off. Most probably they have fallen off, because here and there we meet traces of them. We have already noticed the extreme sensibility of these knights; their readiness to feel for other people; the alertness and intensity of their imagination, which can far outrun the present and can grasp the future effects of a disaster so clearly, that they even faint with grief. We

<sup>1</sup> ll. 2501-11.

<sup>2</sup> l. 2532.

<sup>3</sup> ll. 3096-3120.

should also notice their intense love for *la douce France*, the instinct of patriotism which enables a hero to decentralise his thoughts from his own narrow self. Even the most intelligent and subtle of the Homeric heroes, when they thought of their native land, did not get beyond a kind of home-sickness, but Charlemagne's peers have brains to appreciate the beauty and charm of their country and hearts to feel the spirit of comradeship which grows out of the soil. But the new civilisation can most clearly be recognised in the poet's sense of nature. Scenery has probably always affected men, according to the nature and posture of their minds. In *Beowulf* it awoke a sense of danger, in Homer it suggested a sense of strength, but in the *Chanson de Roland* nature seems to sympathise and change with the moods of men. When Charlemagne realises that his rearguard is being massacred and that he is fifty miles away, the mountains seem high, the valleys are gloomy, the rocks are black and the passes are terrible<sup>1</sup>. As the army hurries back in silence and anger, the sun shines on their arms and is flashed from their helmets and shields, but the mountains still seem to tower above them, vast and gloomy, and the torrents seem to be impassable<sup>2</sup>. That night when Charlemagne lays himself down to rest on the scene of the battle, we are told that the sky is illuminated by stars and that the moon is bright on the stricken field. Thus we keep vigil with the emperor, who lies wide-eyed, thinking of his slaughtered soldiers, till he falls asleep from sheer fatigue<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> ll. 814 ff.

<sup>2</sup> ll. 1830 ff.

<sup>3</sup> ll. 2512-24.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE DECAY OF THE EPIC SPIRIT IN THE NARRATIVE POEMS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

THE Norman Conquest was the last belated migration of the Dark Ages. The foundations of medieval Europe had already been firmly laid. At first sight, the new civilisation seems to be admirably fitted to receive, cherish and then humanise and ennable the old epic tradition which had come down from the "Heroic Age." We have noticed in the previous chapters that the type idealised is the kind of warrior who creates and maintains a superb conviction of his own greatness and dignity. He gathers this consciousness by priding himself on the excellence of his possessions, by demonstrating his strength and skill in battle, by forcing on other men the recognition of his merit so effectually that even after his death they would speak of him as more than human; above all, by conquering fear. A poem which merely describes, however graphically, the occasion and the means of one man's death and of another man's triumph, is a ballad or a lay. An epic, using some such background, shows how the burden of fear falls off and how the spirit springs up to its superhuman stature. These triumphs of the soul, however achieved, can be expressed only in a tale of action, so whenever a poet is full of this idea, he must find the right kind of theme to give it shape. The fitness of his tale depends on the kind of fear which haunts his contemporaries. If the story is a true epic, its form and substance will vary according to the spiritual problem of the age. It is in the victory over human weakness, and in the assertion of human confidence, that the epic preserves its consistency of type.

i. *Medieval Europe appears, at first sight, admirably constituted to carry on the traditions of earlier heroic poetry.*

We now pass on to the later Middle Ages, and we find there the kind of civilisation which ought to foster the same kind of

ideals in the same kind of spirit. In Italy, France, England and Germany, we find a society founded on conquest. A warlike race has taken possession of the land; the previous inhabitants are compelled to work for them, and the land-owners who follow the profession of arms have the fullest scope for their ambitions. Every country of Europe is dotted with castles, which are impregnable fortresses, so caste spirit is sure to be fostered in such isolation, and the overlords will retain their love of war and their pride of life. The occupants of these castles, when not fighting or hunting, must find their own amusements within its walls, so the minstrel's art is not likely to disappear for want of encouragement. Besides, as is abundantly proven in history, the complicated system of land tenure, now called feudalism, though so serviceable in uniting a caste, provided no adequate curb for the instinct of domination and self-aggrandisement. Warriors who accepted territory as a sacred trust to be kept and warded, very soon so acted that what was really a charge became an hereditary possession, till a reigning monarch sometimes found his power so effectually delegated that he owned no land at all. Some vassals went so far as to usurp regal rights over the territory which they guarded, not only disposing of the lives of their subjects, but minting their own coin, making their own laws and deciding on peace and war. So a feudal lord was less likely to regard himself as a vassal than as an absolute monarch. He would not merge his self-esteem in national enthusiasm or in an impersonal sense of loyalty; his pride would cling to himself, his family traditions and his own locality. And lastly, he would find that all the world over there were warriors like himself, ruling in strong castles, and holding in check the same kind of craftsmen, peasants or burghers. He would probably end by feeling that all those of the same rank as himself were members of a fraternity, aloof from all other classes, in some sort banded together and united by common customs and observances as well as by interests.

So it is not surprising to find that this powerful and spirited aristocracy, which dominated European society from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, from the *Chanson de Roland*

to the *Chronique de Bertrand du Guesclin*, has left behind it many long narrative poems which at first remind the reader of folk-epics, at least in some respects. It is worth remembering that they were evolved by much the same leisurely process of imitation, adaptation and accretion, as we imagine contributed to the growth of epics. Thus the word *gesta*, once the plural of *gestum*, comes to mean not the deed, but the poem which glorified it, and then after generations had rehandled the theme, augmenting its episodes and sometimes adding prologues and "queues" till the collection was now thought of as one mass, *gesta* or *geste* stood for the whole cycle, each narrative the work of many brains. These cycles exercised a power which seems to have been irresistibly absorbing. Stories which had descended from immemorial tradition and others which must have been extemporised by some nameless genius, however inspiring, seem unable to stand alone. The professional story-teller found that he must work them into the context of some *Geste*. It seems as if certain great names of history and tradition had acquired such importance and solemnity, that lesser figures needed to borrow dignity by contact with them.

II. *Yet when we come to examine medieval narrative poetry, we find that the heroic spirit is lost or has never developed. This phenomenon is especially surprising in the case of the Arthurian Cycle which seems, from its very beginnings, so well adapted to support the structure of a great epic. Yet the poems of Wace and Layamon are not epics. Nor are the romances of Tristram and Launcelot.*

So both literary and social conditions seem to promise the continuance of heroic poetry in something like the old warlike spirit. But when we pass from these generalisations to examine the immense field of medieval poetry, we find that our expectations are far from verified. We find, instead, the transition from epic to romance. The course of this development has been fully and ably traced elsewhere<sup>1</sup>, and there would be no need to go over the ground again, even if such an inquiry came within the scheme of the present work. But it is necessary to

<sup>1</sup> E.g. L. Petit de Julleville, *Histoire de la Langue et de la Littérature Française*, t. I, chaps. II-IV; W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance*, *passim*.

notice that whether poets keep to the older tradition, as in *Aliscans*, *Garin de Loherain*, *Raoul de Cambrai*, and the romances of the Saracen wars, or rehandle the subject matters of Statius, Dares, Dictys, Vergil, or turn to the history of Caesar and of Alexander the Great, or, following a more modern tendency, have recourse to Ovid, the great story-teller and expert in love—whatever their theme, they miss the epic sense of triumph in achievement, and joy in the realisation of human greatness. Even when the poet keeps nearest to an epic theme—when Charles Martel stops the infidels at Poictiers, or Godefroi de Bouillon enters Jerusalem—the deeds may be described with the greatest emphasis and exaggeration but the spirit behind them is lost sight of. Sometimes the Christians fail in manhood and even suffer defeat and the audience have to look for the *dénouement* to a romance with some Saracen's daughter who betrays her country to rescue her handsome paramour. Besides, these champions of the Church often lose all consciousness of human greatness in a sense of religion. Heroes utter long creeds and prayers; Hell is as clearly conceived as Heaven and too many warriors seem to be afraid of going there; some of the fiercest of their adversaries behold a vision of Jesus on the cross and at once become penitent Christians. When we turn to the more courtly and secular compositions, to the “matter” of Rome or of Troy, we find that the warriors are still stout men-at-arms, especially in *Benoît de Sainte-More's Roman de Troie*, but that their greatest enemies are themselves, and their real conquerors are fair women and the god of love. In the narratives derived from Ovid the weakness and mutability of human nature are even more wholeheartedly confessed, and it seems as if the finer fancies of the Roman poet cannot be enjoyed unless they are made to exemplify or symbolise man's spiritual disabilities.

No doubt one is tempted to lay too much emphasis on the religious aspect of these stories drawn from pagan sources. Moralisations of Ovid may have been listened to or read with as much pleasure as profit, as was the case with the *Gesta Romanorum* and the later *exempla*. Besides, one is likely to be most impressed by compositions in which the desire to edify

is particularly marked and these necessarily stand apart from the main current of courtly romance. Probably a genuine interest in the classics counted for more than was once supposed<sup>1</sup>. After all, it was no troubadour but a Franciscan who translated and moralised the *Metamorphoses* at the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century. Let us then take a glance at the literature which by its subject matter was most likely to appeal to the aristocracy of Europe and to cherish their ideals—the Arthurian Cycles. Assuredly this treasury of early legends has all the qualities requisite for the growth of a mighty epic. Whether Arthur was originally a Breton or a Welsh chieftain, he became by the sixth century the fabled monarch of Great Britain, and the hero of the Celtic races in their struggle with the Anglo-Saxons. In *Historia Brittonum* he is described as the leader of British resistance to Octha, the son of Hengist, Gildas relates his exploits and *Annales Cambriae* record the battle of Mount Badon. His name and fame must have lingered in the memory of the conquered people ever since that time, for several bards of the sixth and seventh centuries sing of him, and *Black Book of Caermarthen*, *Harrowing of Hell*, *Book of Taliesin* and *The Red Book of Hergest* keep his memory green. There seems to have been something in his destiny and position which appealed to all that was most reminiscent and imaginative in his countrymen's temperament. At some periods they actually did picture him as the embodiment of what is most mysterious and powerful in this world of surprises and desires. How far this cult advanced towards an epic conception can be seen in *Kulhwch and Olwen*. Arthur is pictured as a fairy king who woos Olwen; his courtship is associated with one of the "test" stories which, though their like appear in *Nibelungenlied* and *Gawayne and the Green Knight*, are more ancient than the *Iliad*; the monarch himself as well as his two peers are as potent in wizardry as in war. The scenery is closely and accurately described; the names and genealogies of Arthur's heroes are recorded; some of the figures, such as Olwen herself, are

<sup>1</sup> See Edmond Faral, *Recherches sur les Sources Latines des Contes et Romans Courtois du Moyen Age*, 1913.

endowed with that almost divine excellence which betokens the heroic idea. But others, such as Sol, Gwevyl, and in a less degree Kai and Clust, still retain those uncouth and ogre-like propensities—that suggestion of menace overwhelming the human species—with which men seem to have gratified their sense of both wonder and terror in pre-epic periods. The age which produced *Kulhwch* had not yet learnt how to overcome fear. Though the book was in existence at the beginning of the twelfth century, it seems really to belong to that vague, twilight period before the dawn of great epic poetry, when emotions could be clearly symbolised and expressed, but before it was felt that man was great enough to emulate all which really stirred his imagination<sup>1</sup>.

Was it merely an unlucky accident that these legends never developed into an epic? If this or that poet had only been so minded, or had enjoyed such and such an opportunity, could not the Arthurian Cycle, without sacrificing the miraculous or superhuman elements inseparable from their early sources, yet have developed the pride of life, the sense of moral superiority, the freedom from fear, the glory of untrammelled action, which seem so likely to arise from its theme, and which the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf* and the *Chanson de Roland* had realised? The feudal lords of medieval Europe must have cherished and handed down to their descendants the memory of many exploits in Palestine, Turkey, Burgundy, France or England. Such feats of arms need not have become the actual themes of epics—in fact the warlike aristocracies of all ages and countries seem to have preferred their minstrelsy to deal with what was remote and traditional and enjoyed the authority of “oldē bokēs”—but at any rate the Crusades or even the baronial wars might in retrospect have given knights and men-at-arms as inspiring a sense of human glory as could the feuds and incursions of the Heroic Age. Surely the mood was there; nothing more was needed but the genius and goodwill of a poet.

Yet it cannot be urged that either Wace or Layamon succeeded, though neither failed through lack of talent or

<sup>1</sup> See *ante*, chap. II, § 1.

industry. Both poets are ready enough to gather all the older heroic themes from Geoffrey of Monmouth—the glory of equipment, the thrill of battle, duels with monsters, duels with one's mortal enemy, plots, poisonings, acts of treason, dreams, disguises, prophecies, deadly pools and enchantments. Celtic romanticism plays but a secondary part; the bards are far more interested in the protracted struggle between Briton and Saxon and with the imaginary rise of the British kingdom to world power. And yet the Arthurian ideal is not enough to give this material epic life. Both poets, especially Layamon, have devoted much care to the art of telling their story, not only to the metrical scheme, but to vivid and convincing narration, to dramatic speeches and touches of irony or pathos. Again, though their theme is ancient, the handling of it is not antiquated; the influence of the Church is neither ignored nor idealised; Merlin is a man of vast learning as well as a magician; a note on neo-Platonic daemonology is introduced. Yet Wace's and Layamon's *Brut* are not epics but inspired chronicles. The writers do not even distantly and unconsciously share the greatness of their heroes; they are strangers to the enthusiasms at which they hint.

Let us then turn to two other characters, in some sort offshoots of the Arthurian Cycle, who stand out as types of feudal Europe, just as Achilles and Odysseus are types of Achean civilisation.—Tristram and Launcelot. Tristram or Tristan was nephew of King Mark of Cornwall and was so named because his birth caused his mother's death. His step-mother tried twice to poison him, and one of his first generous acts was to beg her life, when she was detected. He enjoyed all the gifts which his age admired. He could play the harp as skilfully as any troubadour; while still a boy he was so famous for venery that men afterwards adopted the hunting terms which he invented; he was so steeped in the spirit of knight-errantry that he rejected the love of King Faramon's daughter, till he had slain Sir Marhaus the enemy of all chivalry. But while still hardly more than a youth, his fate overtook him. According to one story, a swallow, while building its nest, dropped a lock of hair at Mark's feet and the king was so infatuated by its

golden beauty, that he swore to wed no other than its possessor. So Tristram was dispatched to Ireland to fetch the beautiful Isoud or Iseut as bride for his king. But on the return journey they both by mistake drank a love-philtre which Isoud's mother had prepared and which Isoud ought to have drunk with Mark on the day of their marriage. From now onwards they are bound to each other by a passion which ruins and dissipates their lives and ends only in their deaths. Béroul, the Anglo-Norman of the mid-twelfth century, relates that after many adventures and escapes at the Cornish court the guilty pair are at last detected and sentenced to be burnt alive, but Tristram first himself eludes his executioners and then rescues Isoud who has meanwhile been delivered to a band of lepers, and the two lovers for three years lead a wild life, hiding in a forest. At the end of that time Béroul tells us that the love-philtre lost its power and Isoud returned to King Mark, but according to the other Anglo-Norman troubadour Thomas, Tristram never threw off his passion, but fled to Brittany as he was watched too closely at the Cornish court. Eventually, as was the fashion in medieval romanticism, he took to himself a wife, Iseut *aux blanches mains*, while his former passion grew all the more intense for being clandestine, and when he was wounded by a poisoned sword only his paramour could heal him. There is no need to repeat the famous story how Kaherdin brought her to him from Cornwall, but how Tristram's wife made him believe that he was forsaken, and so he died of grief just as his true-love was ready to heal him. Another troubadour tells us that Tristram was surprised by King Mark in Isoud's chamber and was wounded to death. He takes refuge with his friend Sir Dimas, and contrives to see Isoud once more. She wishes to die with him and Tristram embraces her so forcibly that their two hearts break. According to yet another version, repeated by Malory, the two lovers are separated. Isoud becomes so weary of life that she tries to kill herself, while Tristram goes mad with grief and lives like a wild man in the woods. His passion works such havoc with him, that when it is rumoured that this wild man has slain a giant and King Mark has him fetched into the castle, nobody recognises him but his dog.

Assuredly Tristram is one of the most richly gifted and the most nobly conceived figures of all fiction. At first one is tempted to believe that we have here the true epic instinct to glorify or remodel reality. A similar impression is obtained in passing from Luchaire's realistic picture of society under Philippe-Auguste to Mr Meller's *A Knight's Life in the Days of Chivalry*. There must have been something great about the age which endowed its ideal hero with so much generosity, courage, skill and courtesy and raised him so high above material considerations. And yet this same age must have lost the last echoes of the epic voice—at least as regards its tales of court life—for it can watch its paragon fritter away his great powers not even in war, but in the alarms, suspense, defeats of love. Whatever moments of exquisite delight this hero may have won from his anguished and hunted career, he never tasted the epic joy of human greatness in action.

The same is true of his successor Sir Launcelot, a late comer into the Arthurian Cycle, not known in the twelfth century, whom some authorities regard as a kind of parody or satire on Tristram. Such is certainly not the view taken by one of the greatest of all experts in medieval lore, Sir Thomas Malory, who depicts him as the mightiest knight in Arthur's court; famous not only for his prowess but also for his courtesy and personal charm. From his first appearance you realise that he is one of those fortunate mortals for whom things happen. He has only to start on any random journey to encounter the most romantic and thrilling adventures and every episode brings out his generosity and self-forgetfulness, his invincible prowess and unfailing courtesy. And yet his fame does not rest on a life of heroic endeavour but on his devotion to Queen Guinevere and his indifference to all other ladies. As in the story of Tristram, this guilty passion is not represented as a fault, but as an example of constancy and self-sacrifice; and it absorbs and dissipates his manhood just as effectively. On one occasion, when the queen is displeased with him and dismisses him from her presence, he goes mad with grief, leaps out of the window and careers wildly through the country, just as Sir Tristram once did. In this distraught condition, he

meets with varying treatment, till at last he finds his way to a city and is employed as court jester and at last regains his reason<sup>1</sup>. He then returns to Arthur's court and continues his services to the queen more devotedly than ever. When she is captured and imprisoned by Sir Meliagraunce, and he is unhorsed by an ambuscade, he finds his way to the castle in a cart, forces an entrance unattended, and such is the fear of his name that the prisoners are surrendered without a blow being struck<sup>2</sup>. But, like all great men, Launcelot has too many enemies. They set traps for him and at last convinced the king of his guilty relationship. That discovery meant the dissolution of the Table Round, for Launcelot's following was greater than that of the king, and such a fellowship of knights could not exist after its chief ornament was lost. So Launcelot withdrew to France and reigned over that country for some years, but could not for long endure banishment from the country in which he had loved and suffered so much. When Arthur was involved in civil war with Modred, he hastened back to help his former liege-lord. He arrived too late to save the king, who died on the battlefield near Salisbury, but in time to save his own soul. For the last time he visited Guinevere who was now a nun at Almesbury and then devoted himself to the yet more austere pieties of a hermit's life. Thus by the close of his career he renounced, as so much unmeaning effort, the triumphs and gallantries of his manhood.

III. *In fact the emergence of the Celtic spirit marks the decay of the epic ideal. But as so much of medieval poetry is influenced by women, it is an advantage to compare its tone with that of the Nibelungenlied. This great poem has all the qualities which make for epic effect, especially in the heroism and self-sufficiency of the characters. Yet the poet seems to have been oppressed with a sense of human sinfulness; Nibelungenlied is almost an epic of retribution.*

The study of Launcelot's career brings us down to *Morte d'Arthur* and it may well be objected that evidence collected from this book is too late to be convincing. It is true that Malory did not finish his work till 1469-70, when the Middle

<sup>1</sup> *Morte d'Arthur*, xi, xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid. xix.*

Ages were nearly over and when romance had been killed in the Wars of the Roses. But on the other hand, Sir Thomas was sufficiently old fashioned to have saturated himself in Robert de Borron, Chrétien de Troyes, and in the Arthurian lore still preserved in the Thornton and Harley MSS., and he appears to be quite untouched by the new spirit which was moving William of Selling to establish a centre of Italian culture at Canterbury. Very possibly we shall find that, like Milton, he reflects the culture of his youth all the more fully and accurately because it has now passed into the realm of reminiscences and regrets. So the suggestion of aimlessness and distraction, of the elusiveness of earthly merit and happiness, must be inherent in the material which he handles with such care and evident enjoyment. The hint of human futility cannot be the addition of a new age which, a generation later, was to applaud Brandt's *Narrenschiff*.

A glance at the more romantic and fanciful aspects of medieval poetry will confirm this impression<sup>1</sup>. We have already noticed in the case of the post-Homeric age, that as soon as epic warriors lose caste, magicians, fairies and witches gain in power, and that stories of immemorial antiquity, which had lingered among the traditions and superstitious observances of the common-folk, were then revived and decked in newer guises to express the deeper or more exalted sentiments of a later period<sup>2</sup>. We have also observed a tendency of the same kind among stories arising out of the age of Icelandic colonisation. We have now to record a similar recrudescence in the literature of the Middle Ages. The heroism born of religious enthusiasm faded away and visionary beings, from out the shadows of receding paganism, reappear and again make sport with human lives. In fact we sometimes wonder whether Christianity is not losing its hold on men's sympathies. Richard I reverts to the old heathen practice of eating a lion's heart so as to increase his own ferocity<sup>3</sup>. In Layamon's *Brut*, "Wenhavere" does indeed go to the nunnery at Caerleon,

<sup>1</sup> A detailed list of sources would be pedantic even if it were possible. Most of the characters here mentioned are described and discussed in *La Vie et la Mort des Fées*, by Lucie Félix-Faure-Goyau, Paris, 1910.

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. vi, §§ 3, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Richard Cœur de Lion*, ll. 471 ff.

but Arthur passes away to Avalon, and lives with the elf Argante<sup>1</sup>. Sir Orpheo finds his way into fairyland instead of Purgatory. Sir Launfal gives himself up to the embraces of the fairy Triamour. Jeanne d'Arc, as Renan has shown, was more truly inspired by ancient pagan cults than by the Christian Church, which she hardly knew—*Sans qu'elle le sut, elle était plus celtique que chrétienne*<sup>2</sup>. The wizard Merlin becomes counsellor to Uther Penndragon and then to Arthur. Yet there is something of the ancient druids about him. He cannot remain at a king's court because he knows how to discover the most secret thoughts of those about him, so he takes refuge in the forest of Kelyddon according to Geoffrey of Monmouth<sup>3</sup> or of Brocéliande according to Robert de Borron<sup>4</sup>. His prophecies fill Book VII of *Historia Regum Britanniae*. There were other wizards such as Talgesin and Cantigern, but none so famous as Merlin, and surely one of the reasons for this pre-eminence was his paganism. Robert de Borron believed him to have been the son of a devil and a pious Christian.

We soon discover why heathen spirits are suffered to invade Christendom. They are needed to illustrate, if not to symbolise, the passions and perplexities of a more modern and civilised age. Merlin himself is bewitched and confined within a magic circle, and continues to prophesy in the shape of a flowering shrub, mingling his voice with the voices of the forest. This enchantment is accomplished by Ninienne, or Nivene, or Viviane, his jealous and ambitious rival, a passionate and restless fairy, represented as an adherent to the catholic faith, but one who realises that the desires and impulses of the flesh are part of our human personality, and not to be suppressed. As she says to Launcelot, *Moult a grand confort de sa folie qui raison y trouve, et honneur, et si vous les pouvez trouver en vos amours, cette folie est par-dessus tout honorée.* In fact she had nurtured Launcelot in his infancy and supports him in his knightly and adulterous adventures and it is probably for this reason that in the thirteenth century Robert de Borron prefers her to

<sup>1</sup> Madden, vol. III, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> Renan, *La Poésie des Races Celtiques* in *Essais de Morale et de Critique*.

<sup>3</sup> *Vita Merlini*, 1149.

<sup>4</sup> Merlin.

Morgane. For this other fairy plots against Launcelot and Guinevere and endeavours to entice one or other in the "Val-sans-retour," where guilty lovers are held prisoner. In other respects Morgane illustrates even more completely than does Viviane, the danger and charm of women. She is a fairy; she is beautiful and witty; she is learned in astronomy, music, and medicine. She receives and heals Arthur of his wound. According to Chrétien de Troyes<sup>1</sup>, she is Arthur's sister. Her power is all the more irresistible because blended with magic. What wonder that she seduces Sir Guyomar and Rainoart or Ogier? Other witches have crept into the cycles of heroic adventures, bending over cradles in which some future warrior lies or dominating the fortunes and passions of some knight bent on adventure. Both Camille<sup>2</sup> and Madoine<sup>3</sup> know how to tempt their victims from the path of duty and to fill them with restless and unsatisfied desires. Iseut and her mother<sup>4</sup> are almost fairies. In fact Tiphane Raguenet, wife of Duguesclin, because of her wisdom and science was believed to be a magician and astrologer.

Fairies were not only powerful to govern men by their passions. They appear sometimes to have overshadowed their whole lives. Certain poets in the Middle Ages seem to have been almost as conscious as primitive man of the mysterious spectre-haunted environment which enclosed them. In this respect the poems of Marie de France are most suggestive. In *Lanval* and in *Graelent* a fairy befriends and rescues a young knight. In *Tiolet* a fairy bestows on a knight the power to attract animals by whistling. In *Guingamor* a hero meets a young and beautiful nymph bathing. She leads him to her palace. He stays there for a few moments as he thinks, but on returning to this everyday world he discovers that three hundred years have passed. In *Tidorel* a queen's son, now king of a realm, finds that his sire was a fairy and so mounting his horse he quits his kingdom and rides away he knows not whither. Northern legends prove equally adaptable to this sense of insecurity and of wonder. When Sigurth awakens

<sup>1</sup> *Erec et Enide*.

<sup>2</sup> *Claris et Laris*.

<sup>3</sup> *Lancelot du Lac*.

<sup>4</sup> *Tristan*.

Brynhild from her enchanted sleep in the castle surrounded by a wall of flame, he swears to her eternal love. But afterwards Grimhild, Gjuki's wife, gives the adventurer a magic potion which effaces his memory and he weds Guthrun, thereby sealing his own fate.

Did the Church make no effort to regain this lost territory? Religious enthusiasm had so often proved capable of assimilating the most obstinate and unaccountable obsessions, that surely these melancholy visions also, the fruits of disillusionment and perplexity, could have been transformed by the power which said, "See, I make all things new." We shall find, in a later chapter, that theologians and devotees were already diverting the thoughts of men into other and deeper channels, and that this departure had more than a little to do with the collapse of epic inspiration. But even so, the religious spirit could spare enough influence to soften and elevate some of these myths. Take for instance the stories concerning Oberon the dwarf. He was reputed to be the son of Morgane and of Julius Caesar. He was a magician who could not grow old. But he also understood the songs of angels and always inquired of those he wished to befriend whether they had confessed. Huon is the young and erratic friend whom he delights to succour. Huon commits every folly and gives way to every weakness of which a Christian knight might well be guilty, but Oberon never wearies of well-doing and as often as the magic horn is heard, the little fairy king appears to combat wickedness and rectify and forgive the backslidings of mortals. Another such character is Melusine, daughter of the magicienne Pressine. A heavy curse is laid upon her. Every Saturday her nether parts are transformed into a serpent as in Milton's vision of Sin<sup>1</sup>, and if once seen by her husband in this deformity, she will forfeit a human being's right to die and she will be condemned to the cheerless immortality of a fairy. Yet she is as virtuous and beneficent as the Duchess of Bar. She builds churches, founds monasteries and succours the Crusaders. But one day her husband discovered the secret

<sup>1</sup> *Paradise Lost*, II, 650 ff.

of her double nature and with one angry and reproachful exclamation ruined both their lives.

These stories are probably of Celtic origin. Renan suggests that most of them arose or took shape in Brittany as early as the sixth century, and were preserved by some kind of bardic tradition, or in the schools of St Cadoc and St Iltud<sup>1</sup>. We can well believe that pagan influences would cling to that country. In most cases it is unwise to infer the earlier civilisation of a district from the impression which its scenery makes on the modern mind, but there is no doubt that certain parts of Brittany must always have been congenial to the spirit of heathendom. Christianity is most at home in cities, but Armorica is still full of those phenomena which suggest the old unreconciled *genii* of the earth—wild heaths covered with yellow gorse or bracken, immemorial oaks clothed with ivy, their involved and knotty branches sprawling over the way, sunken paths winding down into valleys among streams, bushes and sheer banks, and masses of fantastic stone, either *menhir* and *dolmen*, or giant boulders as big as a house flung here and there about the land. Such objects constantly remind men of the vigour, the durability, the omnipresence and the secrecy of primeval spirits. But it is most significant that during the later phase of the Middle Ages, this naturalism found artistic expression and made the conquest of Christian, feudal and Teutonic Europe. Their spirit is druidic, they dwell on the hidden forces and inexhaustible energy of nature, they belittle men and extol magic at a time when a Christian death on a battlefield among heaps of slaughtered paynims was ceasing to be the crown of life.

To confirm this impression the reader should recall another characteristic of these legends—*l'extrême douceur de mœurs qui y respire*<sup>2</sup>. Take, for instance, the use made of disguises. We have already discussed the various treatments of this theme<sup>3</sup>, and we have seen that in Saxo a lover often employs such a device to rescue his sweetheart after an Odyssean slaughter of his rivals, or else he dies heroically, satisfied at any rate as regards

<sup>1</sup> *La Poésie des Races Celtiques* in *Essais de Morale et de Critique*.

<sup>2</sup> Renan, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ante*, chap. II, § 7.

his passion. But compare the courtship in *Yonec*<sup>1</sup>. Sir Eudemarec comes to his lady's chamber transformed into a beautiful falcon, but the watchful husband contrives a trap with teeth of steel, and the bird lover dies miserably, not to be avenged for many years. In these and such like stories we recognise a peculiar sense of drama—the insight into the unnecessary misery caused to human beings by their passions, their indiscretions and their machinations against each other; the revelation that destiny arises out of circumstances and character. Such speculations are the pastime of civilised and intelligent peoples, who have discarded the epic cult, and who look to the stage to work out these problems. In the twelfth century such visualisation was impossible and the aptitude for melancholy rumination had to find an outlet in romance. It is none the less significant of the phase through which civilisation was passing.

In one respect all these fairy-tales and love-stories are bound to be misleading. They must to a great extent have been composed for women<sup>2</sup> or for demoiseaux playing at love with demoiselles<sup>3</sup>. Consequently the poetry addressed to the leisure hours which they spent together was bound to harp over much on this theme, and to reflect an atmosphere of idleness and unreality. Their literature is not for this reason less interesting and instructive. Without appreciating the tone of these courtly romances, we cannot understand how completely they were superseded by a new type of epic, which arose in a very different world of thought and idealism. The sense of fatality and wasted effort must have been a very real thing, if it could be so much as implied in verses for these occasions. But one is inclined to ask whether the cult of uxoriousness was not a pose which the modern reader might take too seriously. Fortunately we have still to consider the *Nibelungenlied*, with which to test the conclusions formed in this chapter. The German national epic enjoyed every condition favourable to preserving the old warlike, epic spirit, yet

<sup>1</sup> *Marie de France*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Troilus and Criseyde*, II, 43-75; *Inferno*, V, 127 ff.; *Gawayne and the Green Knight*, ll. 1535-48.

<sup>3</sup> *Roman de Flore et Blanceflor*, ll. 250 ff.

we shall discover in it an insistent undercurrent of doubts and misgivings and we shall be able to trace an unmistakeable tendency towards pessimism and disillusionment, and a tone more appropriate to the drama than to the epic.

This great poem had its origin in an age of great deeds. Towards the end of the fourth century the Huns began to swarm into Europe and changed the course of history. Groups of peoples from the Baltic coast had already begun to push their way into Scandinavia and had penetrated as far south as the lower Danube. These settlers now found themselves caught between the people whom they were subduing and the new hordes which were threatening their existence. We shall never know how these rival invaders annihilated or subdued each other, but when this, the most subversive *Völkerwanderung*, was over, we find amongst many other changes that a branch of one nationality, known afterwards as the Burgundians, had established itself in the valley of the Rhine, with its King Gundicarius or Gunther reigning at Worms. Such are the conditions out of which great epics spring. After an heroic struggle, the victors win some fertile land and settle down to develop their civilisation. So the rude beginnings of the German epic appear. The chief incentive of any warlike aristocracy is the passion for wealth and splendour, so their imagination was fascinated by an ancient saga about a treasure sunk in the Rhine. The consciousness of hidden danger and of unfamiliar enemies is the one treacherous thought dreaded by any warrior caste, so this people imagined that the wondrous horde was guarded by an unearthly race, the *Nibelungs*, the children of mist and darkness. But as they possessed one of the pleasantest lands of Central Europe, and had won it by their own strength and hardihood, they liked to hear how a warrior pre-eminent for these qualities became master of that treasure, and asserted the German ideal of heroism, till he fell a victim to treachery. In 437 another wave of Hunnish invasion swept over Europe and when it had passed, the Burgundian conquerors had disappeared from the territory of Worms. But the figures of their hero *Sivrit*<sup>1</sup> and of his

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. II, § 7.

murderer Hagen must have survived that cataclysm and all the other protracted miseries of the Dark Ages, for when they reappear at the close of the twelfth century, they still bear traces of primitive grandeur. Something like a renascence was stirring Central Europe, when Conrad III led a German army on the Second Crusade (1147-9), and the taste for poetry seems to have revived. As the German knighthood had been largely inspired by contact with the French aristocracy, they were naturally attracted by the romances which came from the South. But they also seem to have taken a new interest in their own ballads and lays, and it must have been among these undercurrents of lore and tradition that the Austrians found again their national hero Siegfried.

Before the beginning of the thirteenth century, many strange legends and tales, some drawn originally from Icelandic and Irish sources, had been worked together into one continuous narrative, and though the three chief extant mss.<sup>1</sup> vary in length and tone, all are infused with the spirit of the late twelfth century. In each Siegfried appears as the superman. Like nearly all the great primitive warriors, his power is not bounded by the earth. As Odysseus was disguised by a goddess, so this hero possesses a cap of darkness; as Achilles had been rendered invulnerable, so had Siegfried been immersed in the dragon's blood, and possessed the magnanimity which comes from fearlessness. As nearly all other heroes had won great wealth, so the son of Sigemund had mastered the mysterious Nibelungs' treasure by overcoming the terrible dwarf Alberich. Like Beowulf or Tristram he is a mighty hunter as well as warrior, and like any Saxon or Scandinavian hero he can outdo his rivals in boasting. As with the most ancient warriors, his strength and vitality did not end with his life. In the very gasp of death his spirit pauses before its flight to parley with his murderer, and the power of this curse<sup>2</sup>, which is felt through the rest of the poem,

<sup>1</sup> "A" in Munich, used by Lachmann and most old fashioned in tone; "B" at monastery of St Gall, longer, contains both early and late material; "C" at Donaueschingen, longest, most modern and aristocratic in tone. See any introduction to *Nibelungenlied* or any history of German literature.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *ante*, vol. I, chap. III, § 9.

can be measured by the greatness of the man who uttered it<sup>1</sup>. In the course of centuries he has acquired other and more humane qualities. He is not only strong and courageous; he is handsome, well trained and disciplined. He had cultivated the refinements of the *Minnedienst*. Even before he has felt the flame of love, he hears of the surpassing beauty of a Burgundian maiden and, like King Mark, vows that he will wed no other but her. When they meet for the first time, he displays his sensibility and breeding. He changes colour, he does not trust himself to speak, he suffers to the full the turmoil of a first passion, he despairs of winning her. In these respects the German Siegfried is not of the same type as the Sigurth of the *Eddas*<sup>2</sup>, who had acquired the wisdom of serpents. The conqueror of Alberich resembles the more attractive and accomplished, though less intellectual, heroes such as Kjartan, Hjalte, Thor-wing or the sons of Shelty<sup>3</sup>. This standard of idealisation runs through the poem. Kriemhild is of surpassing beauty, her complexion outshines gold; her love is given to Siegfried only because he performs such prodigies of valour against the Saxons<sup>4</sup>. Such is the depth of her passion that when her husband dies, she weeps tears of blood<sup>5</sup>. Even Hagen, despite his wickedness, is one of the stoutest and truest liege vassals in medieval poetry. All epics glorify feasting, but neither among the Phaiakians, or Geats, nor at Arthur's Court, will find such profusion and feudal hospitality as among the Burgundians and the Huns, or such reckless generosity. The hall which was to prove the Nibelungs' grave<sup>6</sup>, was a huge Gothic building, hung with Arras tapestries, and the beds had coverlets of Arabian samite, ermine and black sable. As we noticed in the case of the *Chanson de Roland*, so in this narrative, these modernised and comparatively complex warriors have cultivated more subtle perceptions. Music has a wonderful power over them. When troubled with fears of treachery, Volkér took out his *vyel* and played so gently and sweetly that the whole hall was filled with melody, and the warriors were lulled to sleep<sup>7</sup>. Among the chieftains who gathered for the

<sup>1</sup> B. xvi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, chap. II, § 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> B. iv.

<sup>5</sup> B. xvii.

<sup>6</sup> B. xxx.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

visit to Hunland, Spielmann, so named because he could play musical instruments, had a following worthy of a king<sup>1</sup>.

It will be noticed that there is little or no genuine religious sentiment in the poem. The minstrel alludes to high mass, and to cathedral services, but only because attendance at church was the fashion in his day. It is easy to see, by comparison with the *Chanson de Roland*, that worship plays no part in the lives of the Burgundians and Huns. When Hagen draws his sword and lays the blade on his knees, the hilt contained a jasper as green as grass<sup>2</sup>, but no one would for a moment expect to find therein the sacred relics treasured in Durandal or Montjoie. At first it might seem as if this freedom from religious enthusiasm brought with it freedom from superstition and independence of spirit, and it cannot be denied that the Nibelungs stand by themselves, sufficient in their own hardihood and consciousness of power. Assuredly the poet intends us to retain unqualified admiration for their worth as warriors. Man for man they as far surpass the Huns as the Acheans surpassed the Trojans, or the Franks surpassed the Saracens. As the poet himself says, there was many a thane *dem in höhem muote lebete dō der lif*<sup>3</sup>. When they crossed the Rhone and a mermaid foretold that all should die except the parson, Hagen flung him overboard to falsify the prophecy<sup>4</sup>. When any warrior engaged in mortal combat, he did not need the thought of divine or of superhuman aid; the consciousness of his own prowess was enough to steel his heart. In this respect the duel between Iring and Hagen ranks among the great fights of epic poetry<sup>5</sup>.

And yet the *Nibelungenlied* is not in any true sense an epic. At the very outset we notice that there are none of those short passages or even single lines which give a profound poetic insight into heroic character. Then we observe that the suggestion of human self-sufficiency, so convincing in *Beowulf* and in some of the Icelandic sagas, is illusive in the *Nibelungenlied*. How comes it that the sense of fate, advancing slowly and

<sup>1</sup> B. xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> B. xxix.

<sup>3</sup> Whose soul and body drew life from his high spirit. B. xxv.

<sup>4</sup> B. xxv.

<sup>5</sup> B. xxxv.

inevitably, is neither grandiose nor exhilarating? The reader does not close the book with an epic confidence in the ultimate goodness or greatness of man. He feels rather an effect of grimness and, as far as he can identify himself with the characters, he feels fear. The reason is not far to seek. The fate which closes in on the Nibelungs is not that mysterious impartial power which stood between the ancient warriors and the caprices of the gods<sup>1</sup>, but a train of evil originating in one fatal deed, which grows and spreads till it has drawn within its influence all the heroes of the story. It would be difficult to find another medieval poem in which man's readiness to sin, and his helplessness in the presence of evil, are more subtly and effectively suggested<sup>2</sup>. Nor does the poet appear to believe that the saints, much less the priests, have any influence over these reckless noblemen and princesses. Etzel, who upholds justice and honour<sup>3</sup>, is powerless against the rush of events. Dancwart's gallantry cannot save him from the miserable consequences of the feud. On the other hand, Kriemhild, once the object of the most exalted *Minnedienst*<sup>4</sup>, gradually sinks to the lowest level of fraud and treachery. In fact the part played by women is the most significant feature of this romance. We have seen in the French *lais* what havoc beauty wrought in the lives of the brave. But this reckless devotion was a homage to the ideal. All true knights were expected to recognise in some woman a charm which was almost divine and so to succumb to the spell<sup>5</sup>, and if Tristram and Launcelot wasted their heroism in such dangerous and exacting service, it was a proof of their nobility, rather than a reproach to the fair adulteress. But the women of the *Nibelungenlied* are the source of all evil. The spirit of jealousy springs up in Brunhild's heart, and grows into a quarrel between her and Kriemhild. Then the spirit of revenge adds its influence to that of hatred, and a plot is conceived. Now the help of the feudal lords is needed and they too have their baser passions, waiting to be roused. The murder of Siegfried

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. III, § 2.

<sup>2</sup> See B. xxxvii.

<sup>3</sup> *E.g.* B. xxxi, xxxiv, xxxvi.

<sup>4</sup> B. xxxii.

<sup>5</sup> *Post*, chap. x, § 4.

may be a treacherous crime, a blot on knighthood, but his death will remove the last obstacle to the expansion of Gunther's kingdom, and the Nibelungs' treasure horde will fall into their power. Thus the avarice and ambition of the men unite with the spitefulness of the women. So the deed is done, the reward is reaped, and the noblemen pass on to other pursuits. But Kriemhild keeps the feud alive and when fortune again smiles on her, and she finds herself queen of a kingdom with warriors to influence or inspire, she uses her power to encompass the death of her enemies. So plots have to be hatched, intrigues set on foot, lies spoken, the sacred laws of hospitality violated, and many gallant knights, who had no share in the original crime, must meet their death.

Is then the great poem a pageant of retribution? In some degree, yes; but of retribution on feudalism. The story, in its late twelfth-century form, reads like the work of some disillusioned and perhaps half monastic moralist, who had weighed romance at its proper worth and was using these ancient legends to disclose the hollowness of the cult<sup>1</sup>. The character of Hagen is conceived in this spirit. He is a formidable warrior and a loyal vassal, but capable of the most treacherous acts and of the most unchivalrous motives, such a knight as we find by scores in the later chronicles. Altogether the *Nibelungenlied* confirms what we have deduced from French and English romances: that tales of warfare and adventure had become, if anything, dramatic in feeling, and that the epic problem of the Middle Ages and its solution are to be looked for elsewhere.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *ante*, vol. I, chap. II, §§ 6, 7, in which the study of the *Iliad* shows how a not dissimilar theme can be developed in so different a spirit.

## CHAPTER VIII

### TRANSITION FROM THE MAN OF ACTION TO THE INTELLECTUAL HERO

IT was the object of the previous chapter to demonstrate that medieval “romances” retain the show and semblance of heroism, but have lost its spirit. In other words, the poems have found their ideal man, but they cannot also find him work to perform, worthy of his mettle. He is still a warrior, capable of the greatest feats of arms, and endowed with the generosity, good breeding and intensely amorous susceptibilities such as the feudal ages admired. But the story of his amours is not merely added to the record of his more warlike achievements to swell the roll of his honour; it takes their place. We must now inquire how far these pictures are true to life. Literature is like a disguise which varies with every age, and so half of its significance is lost unless we can divine the real human beings behind their masks.

Besides, in dealing with this period we have specially good reasons for comparing fiction with facts. The earlier *chansons* appear to have been composed for public recitations, and, as suits the spoken word, their versification is characterised by rhythm and assonance. The later romances are metrical and rhymed, as if composed to be read. Hence it is usually concluded that the medieval epic began to decay as soon as books became common. In the old days, it is argued, the minstrel was forced to seek an audience, and whenever he found one men predominated and so the story had to glorify the affairs of men. But the more modern verse-maker produced his wares to circulate in writing, and manuscripts were more readily welcomed by women than by men. We have already noticed that the romances themselves bear witness to their popularity with women<sup>1</sup>, but that the *Nibelungenlied*, which must have appealed to a more masculine taste, has much the

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. vii, § 3.

same outlook on life<sup>1</sup>. Are we then to assume that these tales of wasted but adventurous lives and intense passions are true of the whole epoch, and such as appealed to men as well as to women? Are their pictures of brilliant but misspent activity the expression of men who find that they are taking shadows for realities; who profess the ideal of knighthood, and now realise that its attainment has ceased to satisfy them? If so, their scepticism and disillusionment are signs that the true hero of the age could no longer realise himself among the chivalry of feudalism, and had found his proper field of action elsewhere. These conclusions are too fundamental and far-reaching to be based on simple conjecture. We must see what kind of lives the great men of this period really were living. So we turn to the chronicles. It is often suggested that society in the later Middle Ages had lost its elasticity; that its members were rigidly classified according to their callings, rank upon rank, like the sculptures of the Last Judgment Day in Cathedral portals, or like the systematised and departmental activities of the "Field full of Folk." Yet contemporary records enable us to recognise within these limits that fascinating diversity of opinion and constant clash of personalities and castes, which are supposed to be the peculiarity of modern life. Above all we shall again recognise the tendency for different standards, cults and ideals to overlap before they successively supplant each other in the movement of civilisation. This phenomenon has already been noticed in the Dark Ages<sup>2</sup>, and we shall discover that in the succeeding centuries the line of development led into a very different world of thought and of imagination.

1. *The chroniclers record examples of Crusaders who continued the tradition of the Chanson de Roland, and demonstrate in how many respects the adventures and interests of actual warfare were only the counterpart to what we read in the romances.*

As late as the fourteenth century we still find warriors whose courage comes from the belief in heavenly assistance and who are convinced that the prowess which wins honour in this

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. vii, § 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, chap. ii, § 6.

world will win Paradise in the next. King Philip believed that valiance depends on piety and that therefore *Dieu donne grant don et grant grâce au chevalier crestien qu'il seuffre estre vaillant de cors, et qu'il seuffre en son servise en li gardant de pechit mortel; et celi qui ainsi se demeinne doit l'en appeler preudomme, pour ce que ceste proesse li vint du bon Dieu*<sup>1</sup>. Edward I still believed so profoundly in relics that he supposed his success to be transferred by such means, and, when on his deathbed in 1307, bade his eldest son always to carry his bones in the army as often as he set out to fight the Scots<sup>2</sup>. But the greatest and most representative of all religiously inspired warriors was St Louis himself. Even the Saracens knew that when he came out of his tent, he prostrated himself and made the sign of the cross over his whole person. Like the warriors of the eleventh century he had the profoundest trust in relics. When Baldwin II, emperor of Constantinople, ceded to him what was alleged to be Christ's crown of thorns, he brought the treasure in triumph to Paris in 1239 and built the Sainte-Chapelle to receive it. Louis also enjoyed that double confidence which comes from the expectation of fame in this world and of eternal felicity in the next. When the Crusaders disembarked at Damietta, he issued a proclamation announcing that if defeated, the Crusaders would go to Heaven as martyrs, while if victorious their fame and that of Christendom would be published over all the world<sup>3</sup>. He seems to have shared something of the extreme sensibility which we have noticed in Roland and in his compeers. When he received at Sayette the news of his mother's death, he gave way to such uncontrollable grief that for two days no one durst approach him, just as Edward I wept bitterly over his father's death, to Froissart's great surprise, as he thereby became king. When Louis's own death drew nigh, as his son the Count of Alençon told Joinville, he looked to the saints to bear away his soul, calling especially on St James and on St Denis.

Thus the spirit of the *Chanson de Roland* lived on through the later Middle Ages, and many another lesser knight, even in still

<sup>1</sup> Joinville.

<sup>2</sup> Froiss. bk 1, chap. xxvi.

<sup>3</sup> Tillemont, *Vie de St-Louis*, t. III, p. 239, ed. de Gaulle, *Soc. de l'Hist. de France*. Quoted in essay on St Louis by Sainte-Beuve (*Causeries*), who must be consulted for a thorough study of the king's character.

later times, may have emulated the simple faith of Charlemagne's paladins. Heroism was not likely to die for lack of opportunity. Gaston de Foix particularly congratulated Froissart on the marvellous deeds of arms which he had the good fortune to record<sup>1</sup>. A nobleman might well think so, for the battles of this period abounded in heroic incidents which lent themselves to the spirit of romance, as when, in the struggle by the bridge of Lussac in 1369, Sir John Chandos was stricken down but his uncle Edward Clifford bestrode his body in the true Homeric manner<sup>2</sup>. Sometimes famous warriors used to fight in disguise or engage in a duel with some unknown antagonist, and after effecting his capture render him his freedom and profess friendship<sup>3</sup>. When Englishmen met Scots we are told that they fought without mercy as long as their weapons endured, and then separated with mutual courtesies<sup>4</sup>. So Hagbard the son of Hamund parted from the sons of Sigar after a battle lasting all day<sup>5</sup>; so Walter, Hagen and Gunther, all three seriously wounded, drank the wine together with Hildegund<sup>6</sup>. In the days of Beowulf, the *comitatus* provided at once the strongest impulse and the best opportunity for heroism, and it is not difficult to see how the institution grew into the idea of the Round Table. Yet this conception was hardly more than a romantic picture of what really happened. The Black Prince at one time is said to have maintained no less than twelve hundred gentlemen in his private service and offered Sir James Lord Audley "500 marks of yearly revenue" to be one of their number. Nor have the epics and romances outdone reality in recounting how these warriors were entertained<sup>7</sup>. The actual conduct of a campaign must have given many opportunities for individual gallantry and adventure, not unlike the knight-errantry of the romances. When, for instance, the English army was trying to establish contact with the Scots, fifteen or sixteen English gentlemen-at-arms started off each on an independent search through the

<sup>1</sup> Bk II, chap. xxii.

<sup>2</sup> Froiss. bk I, chap. CCLXX.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* bk I, chap. CLII.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* bk II, chap. CXXXVIII.

<sup>5</sup> Saxo, VII, lxix<sup>a</sup>, p. 341.

<sup>6</sup> *Waltharius*.

<sup>7</sup> Froiss. bk I, chaps. XVI, XIX.

intervening country, and Edward promised a knighthood and £100 to the first man who could bring him reliable news<sup>1</sup>.

There is plenty of evidence to prove that Froissart, who so naïvely admires this world of heraldry and feudalism, was yet no idealist who suppresses unpleasant truths. He fully recognised that envy and greed were often the real reasons for wars between noblemen, as when the English allied with the Flemings against the French after the battle of Rosebeque<sup>2</sup>. He cherished no illusions about the lesser knights-at-arms. "Everyday they imagined by what subtlety they could get one of another, by deeds of arms or by stealing of towns, castles and fortresses."<sup>3</sup> Warriors, as he saw, were robbers. Yet the same chronicler has left on record how often in actual life, as in the romances, noblemen like Sir John of Hainault sacrificed their most obvious interests to the worship of women<sup>4</sup>. Some of the young bachelors attached to the commission which Edward sent over to establish his claim to the French throne, made a vow to their young ladies that they would not see out of one of their eyes till they had achieved some deed of arms, and so covered it up with silk<sup>5</sup>. No sooner was war declared than Sir Walter Manny collected forty spears and rode through Brabant night and day without resting; he had made a promise before ladies to be the first to enter France. The common folk of Europe had no share in the cult of women. In Wat Tyler's rebellion, and much more in the Jacquerie, women were submitted to unspeakable outrages. Yet among the nobility it is surprising to what extent they influenced men in this age of lawlessness and violent passions, and they seem to have been worthy of the part which they played, in fact as in fiction<sup>6</sup>.

II. *The chroniclers also bear testimony to the unreality and scepticism of feudal civilisation, not only in matters of religion, but even in the practical business of war.*

But there are two sides to the picture which the chroniclers draw. So far we have confined our attention to the warriors

<sup>1</sup> Froiss. bk I, chap. xviii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* bk I, chap. cccccxxviii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* bk II, chap. xxi (North's transl.).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* bk I, chap. ix.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* bk I, chap. xxviii.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. *ibid.* bk I, chaps. LXXII, LXXVII, LXXX, CXXXVIII, CXLVI, CCCXCVI.

who lived an imaginative or emotional life, either continuing the tradition of Charlemagne, or emulating the spirit of the later romances. But we must now consider others who were utterly prosaic in their self-interest, and yet others who lent themselves to the forces of disintegration. Here again we meet in history the counterpart of the romances. In the poems which follow the *Chanson*, some knights are filled with religious sentiment, but others, especially the later ones, are possessed with a certain rationalism often amounting to irreligion. If we take Frederick Barbarossa as a type of the older world, we might take as pioneer of its disintegration Frederick II, who aimed at suppressing feudalism and destroying the prestige of the pope and conducted a crusade without the support of the Church. Nor need we imagine that all the gentry who followed and admired St Louis were as devout as he. We have good reason to suspect that Joinville was very far from sharing the enthusiasms of his royal master. Surely none but a sceptic would have noted that it needs a Bedouin to dispense with armour because he alone is convinced that our lives are in the hands of God; or would have recorded how Yves le Breton saw an old woman cross the street with a vessel of fire and a jug of water wherewith to burn Paradise and extinguish Hell *pour ce que je ne veil que nulz face jamès bien pour le guerredon de paradis avoir, ne pour la poour d'enfer*. A poet represents the murderers of Thomas à Becket as showing the utmost contempt for two hair shirts which they found among the archbishop's effects—*wel filliche heo castem heom a-wei: ase pei heo nouzt wurth nere*<sup>1</sup>. Truly, as Pope Urban remarked, "Men of war live not by pardons, nor they set not much thereby but in the article of death."<sup>2</sup>

We have noticed in poems otherwise so different as *Tristan* and *Nibelungenlied* that the imaginary heroes of this time were not heroes in the older sense, except possibly Siegfried. They had no great purpose or necessity before them; they do not seem to have believed in themselves. They might engage in

<sup>1</sup> *The Death of Thomas à Becket*, l. 2159.

<sup>2</sup> Apropos of intrigues resulting in crusade of bishop of Norwich, 1383. Froiss. bk 1, chap. ccccxxviii (North's transl.).

wars or adventures, as if in memory of some ancient legend, but their real enemies were their own passions and those who thwarted their desires. This altered view of life may be partly due to the new doctrine of love which from the twelfth century onward began to spread from one aristocracy of Europe to another<sup>1</sup>. But even if we accept that explanation, we have still to ask how such a theory came to exercise so resistless a fascination, and why the passion was supposed to unsettle the warrior's conception of knighthood and duty. So we turn again to the history of the time and we discover in the chronicles that this sense of futility and disillusionment hung over the actual business of life. The fevered aimlessness of the romances was at least in some part the expression of what men and women really felt. As we approach the age of Froissart it is particularly significant that warfare degenerates into sham and mimicry. We find that armies which set out with such feastings and dubbing of knights take no measures to get into touch with their enemies, and then, when they do meet, expect that no unfair advantage should be taken of position<sup>2</sup>. These quixotisms have too much of the *beau geste* to illustrate more than the unreal side of war. The true spirit of the age is more clearly revealed by an episode at the battle of Rosebeque. It was proposed in the French army to bring out and display the *Oriflamme* against the Flemings; but then some remembered that the magic banner, once sacred to the abbey at St Denis, had come straight from Heaven to comfort the servants of God in warfare against His enemies. Surely it could not lawfully be employed against fellow-Christians. One imagines how such a proposal would have shocked de Brancion, St Louis's friend, who after merely driving some German robbers from a church, knelt down and implored God: *Sire, je te prie, qu'il te preigne pitié de moy, et m'oste de ces guerres entre crestiens*<sup>3</sup>. No doubt there were still noblemen who cherished such thoughts; one imagines that Chaucer's knight might have been of the company. But in Flanders such scruples soon gave place to casuistry; the palladium was displayed and we are told that

<sup>1</sup> *Post*, chap. x, § 4.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Froiss. bk i, chaps. xviii, cxxvii.

<sup>3</sup> Joinville.

it worked miracles<sup>1</sup>. We have even more conclusive evidence of the faithlessness and cruelty which underlay the pretensions of feudalism. At the first battle of Juberoth, the army under the king of Portugal took many French and Gascon prisoners. When it was realised that the king of Castile was advancing on them with a superior force, the Portuguese at once decided to kill all whom they had captured, and the English agreed, both concluding "for if we kill them not, while we be a fighting, they will escape and slay us, for there is no trust in a man's enemy."<sup>2</sup>

III. *Thus contemporary records agree with the poetry of the age, but also reveal the causes of this decadence: the rivalry of the middle class.*

So the manners and conduct of feudal chivalry were like its poetry: often pretentious and inconsistent, and not always touched by true nobility. It is easy to see why these emblazoned and steel-clad warriors were less purposeful and imposing than their more savage ancestors. They were no longer the highest product of civilisation; they had ceased to be the crown and pride of their race. The first graphic demonstration of this decline is claimed to be the battle of Crécy<sup>3</sup>, but the rise of a new power had been made known to Europe more than forty years earlier at the battle of Courtray. On that day over six thousand knights and gentlemen were slain by the Flemish militia; villeins proved themselves able to wield the weapons which they manufactured for the nobles, and displayed a knowledge of strategy and tactics superior to that of the aristocracy. All through Froissart's chronicle this anomaly appears. In nearly every description of a battle we realise how helpless and unreliable the feudal warrior had become and how incapable of organising and ensuring his own triumph. The chivalry of Europe may not yet have begun to understand their own decadence, but they must have lost some of their confidence and they must have realised that they

<sup>1</sup> Froiss. bk I, chap. ccccxxi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* bk II, chap. xxxv (North's transl.).

<sup>3</sup> See the well-known passage by J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People*, chap. v, § 8.

were no longer strong enough to be always at the same time lordly and generous. The kings added to their discomfiture by creating a *noblesse d'épée*, to replace the old hereditary aristocracy. Frederick Barbarossa actually knighted peasants on the battlefield and Philippe le Bel ordered that the eldest of two sons of a villein should receive a like honour.

These innovations were justified by the heavy losses which the nobility had incurred in so many disastrous battles, and such additions to their numbers might easily have been absorbed, had they still felt themselves to be supreme. The dignity and self-confidence of any class depend upon comparisons, and the gentry gathered little comfort when they watched the progress of peasants, mechanics and merchants; the lower classes who had once been their ancestors' subjects. The great cities which, before the coming of feudalism, had enjoyed importance, were now beginning to recover their power. In England, under Henry I, the citizens of London, Oxford, Canterbury and York began to be conscious of a corporate existence and to feel the beginnings of political power. Under Henry II, Saxons were included with Normans as coheritors and the burgesses of some towns were allowed to acquire ownership of lands which they occupied. From now onwards, the middle class became a power on which the king could rely when confronting the older forces of feudalism, and in 1264 this political importance was fully established by the right to elect representatives to Parliament. The French *bourgeoisie* won recognition at about the same time as the English. They were admitted to the private council chamber of St Louis. Under Philippe le Hardi they took their place in the parliament and influenced the administration of justice, which had once been in the hands of the Church. Philippe le Bel admitted them to the *Assemblée Générale* and to the councils of the *États Généraux*. Thus the Commons became the *tiers état*, filling offices of administration and finance, supplying the *bas clergé* with its most distinguished members and municipalities with their best magistrates. But what chiefly lowered the aristocracy were the expenses incurred in the crusades and in other epic adventures. We find that some

were obliged to mortgage and eventually to sell their lands to commoners, and even to cede their feudal privileges, such as the rights to coin money and to administer justice. All over Europe, feudalism was playing a double part, flaunting its heraldic splendour while undergoing the humiliations which wait on decaying greatness. At Florence, the townsfolk forbade the aristocracy to carry arms within the confines of the city. In London, the parliaments of Edward III simply ignored the wars in France as being the amusements of the nobility, but watched with jealous care the civil liberties of the people. One of the most curious assertions of the new order took place just outside Paris. As the French king once approached his capital he was met by the whole muster of the citizens in battle array and in reply to the constable of France, they declared "Sir, save your grace we were never of will to do anything against the king; but, sir, we be issued out for none other cause but to show the king what puissance the Parisians be of."<sup>1</sup>

In a world thus constituted, feudalism might well continue to exist for centuries and might even play a useful part in the progress of society, but it could no longer inspire epic poetry. The cause would not lie in the apathy of the audiences or in the scarcity of poets, for the age seems to have placed the greatest faith in imaginative literature, but in the atmosphere surrounding knightly exploits. Let the reader picture to himself a poet of the older school consulting his books for some theme worthy of his minstrelsy. No doubt the feeling of reverence was there, and these venerable written pages vouched for the truth of the story, however wonderful it might seem. But when the poet started to retell the episode in a way that his contemporaries would understand, he found that warfare was like a door which you cannot enter without stooping. The world of modern knighthood was too full of petty humiliations, and efforts ignobly wasted. Ancient ghosts lost stature when they assumed these latterday shapes. They could love and suffer but they could hardly remain heroic.

But surely, it may be urged, the world with all its activities

<sup>1</sup> Froiss. bk 1, chap. ccccxxvi.

must have seemed spacious and stimulating to the rising middle class, for inspiration comes to those who are beginning to realise their power and to long for opportunity. Would not the new generation of poets employ the ancient forms and figures to express their modern hopes and enthusiasms? Stories are like vehicles to carry thoughts, and the author generally avails himself of the most familiar, because they are the most readily received. In fact we have already seen that the epic emotions of some late heroic ages have often been infused into legends of incalculable antiquity. Surely the hopes and fears of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries would advance along the established line of development. Such a process did indeed continue to operate and we shall have occasion to record some amazing examples of originality fostered in conservative forms<sup>1</sup>. But with a few exceptions we shall find that the middle class ideals and enthusiasms were not of the sort to be kindled in the framework of knightly exploits. Men and women of the new age already knew too much about "emblazoned shields," "caparisons and steeds," "bases and tinsel trappings."<sup>2</sup> They realise that the gulf between the past and the present has become too wide to be bridged. Saxo Grammaticus himself bears testimony to this cleavage. We have already noticed that the Danish logographer, though so profoundly versed in heroic lore, was not really imbued with its spirit. He had the insight of an antiquarian rather than the sympathy of an epic poet<sup>3</sup>. So he is enabled to throw a curious light on the less idealistic aspect of warfare. He represents Wermund detailing the four classes of fighters<sup>4</sup> (*quadrifaria dimicancium varietas*). His analysis begins like a review of the different heroic types; first the men who temper their heroism with humanity, and we think of Beowulf, Kjartan, Olver Barna-karl, then the reckless and bloodthirsty warriors, and Ole, Grettir, Jarmerik and Fridleif come to mind<sup>5</sup>. But Wermund has also to confess that the bulk of their armies is made up of gaudy and blue-blooded

<sup>1</sup> *E.g. post*, chap. xi, § 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, chap. iii, § 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Ante*, chap. ii, § 6.

<sup>4</sup> From *Paradise Lost*, ix, 34-6.

<sup>5</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, iv, xxxiii<sup>b</sup>, p. 165.

poltroons (*sanguine clari inanique tantum proceritate conspicui*)—men of vast possessions and ancient lineage who cannot avoid entering the battle, but are far too fond of life to risk losing it—*quos lucis aviditas rerum dominio contracta, plus ignauie quam nobilitatis uiribus indulgere compellat*. We cannot tell whether Saxo invents or repeats this judgment, but no one would have put on record such a sentiment unless convinced of its truth. In the Heroic Age a man's courage was generally in proportion to his wealth<sup>1</sup>. Now we see that what Sarpedon found to be the chief incentive to heroism, the medieval chronicler believes to be the cause of cowardice. Robert von Brunne saw nothing in tournaments but inducements to commit one or more of the seven deadly sins<sup>2</sup>. Caesarius von Heisterbach in 1223 records a vision of dead knights forced by the powers of Hell to take part in a frenzied tournament, and the writer then goes on to dilate on noblemen who oppressed the poor to make a brave show in heraldic arms (*ad ostensionem virium et laudis humanae*), though many of them are thereby reduced to beggary (*corpora debilitantur et res dilapidantur*)<sup>3</sup>. He even imagines a special punishment for armoured knights in the next world<sup>4</sup>.

IV. *It is this middle class which now becomes the source of social idealism and poetic inspiration. If an epic was again to arise, it would have to be in this newer atmosphere.*

So we may conclude that the court poets were not voluntarily resigning their right to express and interpret the higher and deeper ardours of their age. On the contrary they seem to have gathered up all the passions and ambitions of the warrior caste, and to have worked them into the most vivid and imposing forms. It was the quality of the material which failed them. Was there then no field left for the men whose genius retained a profounder insight into human greatness? Such thinkers and visionaries there were, but they had left on one side the worn-out problems of the battle-courage and feudal magnanimity. They were already part of a more advanced age and were studying the kind of human grandeur

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. II, § 5; vol. II, chap. I, § 1; chap. VI, § 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Handlyng Synne*, ll. 4571–4636.

<sup>3</sup> *Libri VIII Miraculorum*, I, 34.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* I, 43.

which could triumph over the newer and more spiritual evils besetting their path of progress.

It has already been shown in an earlier chapter<sup>1</sup> that the advent of Christianity presented the poet and story-teller with a choice of careers. He could stay at the court of some half converted or wholly pagan king, and keep alive the aggressive domineering spirit of the chieftain's followers with his tales of strength and daring. Or he could enter some monastery and, after learning the vanity of trusting in carnal weapons, might discover that the miracles wrought by Christian piety and holiness were the chief glory of human nature. In either case he would find it difficult to catch that spirit of action and of self-sufficiency that we call epic, because, whichever his mode of life, he must have realised that it did not stand supreme. The dream of human excellence and power had to be shared between two opposite ideals. It was not till the eleventh century that contact with the paynims enabled the same men to excel as warriors and worshippers. In that century there arose one of those brief periods in which different temperaments could share in the same enthusiasms. The same heavenly guerdon could be won by the greatness which asserted itself in a cavalry battle and the greatness which needed the silence of the cloister. And so, while feudalism reached its highest glory in the Crusades, some of the greatest religious orders were founded<sup>2</sup>. So for a while, at least in hopes and ideals, the knight and the cenobite stood together. Not only the founders of these orders, but most of their members, seem to have been of noble birth. If the low born found entrance into a monastery it was generally as a *conversus* or lay brother. The earlier Crusades also did good service by attracting to the Holy Wars many clerks who had taken the vow because of a certain unworldliness of mind, even though unfitted for monastic life. Those left behind were men with a special aptitude for a monk's vocation. The greatest succeeded in blending religious and secular ideals in the realm of the intellect. Such a one

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. iv, § 3.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Camaldulians, 1012; Vallombrosians, 1038; Grandmontines, 1076; Carthusians, 1084; Cistercians, sometime in second half of eleventh century.

was the famous Suger, educated at St Denis with Louis VII and afterwards his chief adviser. But perhaps the ideal of this period is most clearly realised in the character of St Bernard, the greatest of all Cistercians, who in 1115 founded Clairvaux, the mother of sixty-eight affiliated houses. He again and again fomented outbursts of crusading enthusiasm, but remained himself in Europe combating heresy, healing schisms, calming scholastic controversies and counselling popes and kings. Thus he was a statesman, scholar, orator and administrator, as well as a religious and crusading enthusiast, and up till his death in 1153 he combined warlike energy with intellectual activity and spiritual fervour.

As we have seen, this community of enthusiasms was not destined to survive the changes and chances of many centuries. The aristocracy gradually lost the consciousness of their high calling; the sons of merchants and petty officials were encroaching on the *privileges* of the feudal lords; in some cases the middle class had overridden the nobleman's pretensions to leadership. Whither were the ardent and enterprising spirits to turn? Epics are neither the work of actual warriors, nor the distant memories of visionaries who live only in the past. A great poem of action comes from an onlooker who has himself been in sympathy with some heroic achievement and who can thus appreciate and idealise the same quality of human greatness arising out of any other exploit. Poets with this sort of temperament need not live in an age of material conquest, but they must at some time have breathed an atmosphere of hope and ambition, charged with the sense of growing power. So we have now to ask whether any spiritual movement had accompanied the social expansion of the middle class. Had they reached some fresh stage of progress from which, as from the highest point of a mountain pass, men perceive new dangers and also feel in themselves new power to overcome the menace? Now that the latest consequences of the Holy Wars were before their eyes, they would hardly be satisfied in imagination to recapture the grandeur and glory of the early Crusades; as they had risen by the decadence of the aristocracy, they were still less likely to picture to them-

selves some feudal war as if it had the spaciousness and heroism of an *Iliad*. Whether they knew it or not, they had outgrown these sources of idealism. But were there no other kinds of victories, which human nature might be great enough to achieve, and no other objects of fear for heroes to subdue? In answering this question we come upon one of the most fascinating and remarkable phases in the history of human progress.

v. *What must most have impressed any imaginative thinker of the later Middle Ages was not the menace of war but the tendency of all institutions to degenerate.*

When new troubles arise<sup>1</sup>, men no longer draw comfort from the older sources of idealism and encouragement. For instance, in the mid-thirteenth century Iceland was conquered by a Norwegian king, and was terrorised by volcanic eruptions. In 1320 a Swede became king of Norway, and about the same time all northern Europe was afflicted with pestilence and famine. It cannot be coincidence that during this period of perplexity and humiliation the race which had kept so closely in touch with its ancient heroic age, now began to lose interest in the *Eddas*<sup>2</sup>. Further south the prospects were just as unsettling. The rising generations, one after another, watched the warriors of their own time flinging away their lives and wealth as well as their honour on reckless and self-seeking adventures. When they turned their eyes to the Church, the spectacle was even more depressing. The clergy had suffered from the Crusades almost as much as the noblemen. Many parishes were without either income or administrators. Besides, the Church, which by the thirteenth century had lost nearly all its control over the administration of justice, was constantly involved in friction with the civil authorities, especially in France. We may take as an example the "Albigensis Crusade."<sup>3</sup> This disastrous war is now thought to be

<sup>1</sup> The decadence of the later Middle Ages has been abundantly discussed in innumerable works. Amongst others the reader will find *From St Francis to Dante, A translation of all that is of primary interest in the chronicle of the Franciscan Salimbene*, by G. G. Coulton, of great interest.

<sup>2</sup> H. A. Bellows, Introduction to *The Poetic Edda*, N.Y. 1923.

<sup>3</sup> P. Meyer, *Chanson de la Croisade Albigoise*, 2 vols. 1875; H. C. Lea, *Hist. de l'Inquisition au Moyen Age*, 1903.

the first step towards the unification of France. But with what feelings would thinking men of the thirteenth century contemplate a heresy which Philippe-Auguste and the provincial lords refused to aid the pope in repressing, which occasioned the murder of the papal legate in 1208, and the inauguration of a so-called crusade in 1209 and filled South France with bloodshed and pillage till 1218? Students of Italian will remember the accusations which Dante brought against the Church, and students of English literature will recall the exposures in *Piers Plowman* and the genial but none the less telling portraiture of the *Canterbury Tales*. Jean Roche-Taillade, a minor friar, whom Pope Innocent imprisoned in Avignon, embodied his strictures in a fable which was to prove prophetic. Once upon a time, he said, a young bird was born into the world without feathers, so the others lent him each a few of their own, because he seemed to be so comely but ill-clad. By-and-by the fledgling discovered his power to fly and waxed so proud of his coloured plumage that the other birds gathered together and resolved to strip him of his borrowed feathers.

But it was no new thing to despair of the regular clergy, and surely the observer, however depressed, could draw comfort from the contemplation of the monasteries. Monks were in no sense priests, ordained to be ministers of the word; they had, indeed, come into existence as correctives of Mother Church; the great religious orders of the eleventh century were simply bands of volunteers who strove to realise, in seclusion from the world, an ideal of poverty and of self-surrender. In fact they avoided the villages and towns in which the regular churches stood, and built their monasteries in the wildest and most desolate spots. But since the rule of St Benedict industry and productive labour had become an obligation in most institutions, and so the best administered had not been able to escape accumulating wealth or becoming centres of civilisation round which towns often gathered<sup>1</sup>. It is true that few could be suspected of sinking to the degradation which seems to have been common in the sixteenth century, yet even fewer retained the almost god-like simplicity and blamelessness of

<sup>1</sup> H. B. Workman, *The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal*.

the twelfth. Even the Cistercian order founded in 1098 by the abbot of St Michel de Tonnere as a protest against the wealth and luxury of Cluny was to prove that the industry and intelligence of the monks could not be kept within the narrow limits of monastic poverty. As their wealth accumulated and they discovered the power of thriving commerce, what wonder that the love of worldly splendour and influence gradually invaded the order? While the Cistercian monasteries were gradually becoming less and less of a retreat from the vanities of the world, they were also surrendering their position as an admonisher of the secular church. The Cluniac movement had failed because all the daughter houses of the original monastery had been kept under the jurisdiction of its abbot. The Cistercians allowed each foundation to be its own master. But they bound themselves to the pope by vows of direct obedience, and allowed the abbot of Citeaux, in whom they acknowledged a certain presidential authority, to become a highly placed functionary of Rome<sup>1</sup>. Thus moralists who were already aghast at the worldly ambitions of the Church, now saw the most widespread monastic institution apparently supporting Rome's dream of temporal power. The chronicle of *Jocelyn of Brakelonde* will also give the reader some idea of how the insidious temptations of wealth and power crept into one of the strictest and best ruled monasteries of the time.

Thus, despite the expressiveness of Gothic architecture, the wistfulness of church music and the romance of coloured windows and of illuminated manuscripts, Europe was entering upon another "Dark Age." Its decadence then as always was marked by the recrudescence of superstition. On the eve of a battle, the soldiers once thought that they heard the "fiends of hell that played and tourneyed . . . for joy of the great prey that they were likely to have there."<sup>2</sup> Near the middle of the thirteenth century Caesarius records two cases of a woman who believed in the sacrament, stealing it *maleficii causa*.

Truly the thinkers and poets of the new age who looked out

<sup>1</sup> H. B. Workman, *The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal*.

<sup>2</sup> Froiss. bk i, chap. ccccix (North's transl.). <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* bk i, chaps. i and ii.

on the world in search of dangers to face and victories to win found no lack of adversaries, though other weapons were needed than Hrunting, Durandal, Excalibur and Skofnung. The enemy had indeed shifted his ground. He no longer conspired with the Saracen against the nations protected by the True God. He had crept like a wolf in disguise into the Christian fold. In fact the peoples of Europe had reached a curious phase of civilisation in which the most thoughtful and cultured beheld so many abstract and intangible dangers threatening the welfare of the human species, that they ceased to trouble themselves about such secondary inconveniences as border raids and interracial wars. These, as we have seen, were left to kings and feudal lords and to troubadours. The serious minded were engaged in understanding these other more insidious and pervasive evils, and then in learning to overcome them.

vi. *One of the first great efforts of man to conquer the sense of decadence was made by the Friars. The movement was bound to spread because of the simplicity and directness of their ideal. For these same reasons it was also bound to fail after the first enthusiasm had worn off; the evils of the time were too complex. Intellect and reason were now the weapons required.*

We have now to study this new kind of warfare, and the qualities which it called into existence. The later Middle Ages are generally described as an age of decadence, but few epochs in history are more remarkable for the refusal to despair and for energy and resourcefulness in winning to a better life. No doubt to contemporaries existence seemed to go on much as before, but at this distance we can see that the idea of progress had changed. Mankind had become like an army which forms a new front to face a new enemy. Who were now the leaders of Europe and how did they unite their efforts—their actions as well as their thoughts—in conquering, without escaping, their destiny?

One thinks at first of the coming of the Friars, and there was indeed in this movement, besides its proselytising zeal, something which stimulated a new spirit in man. To begin with, both the Dominican and Franciscan orders were a protest

against the older and more aristocratic forms of monasticism, and though Domingo de Guzman was perhaps of noble birth, his message, like that of St Francis, ignored the differences or distinctions of this world. In fact St Francis had moved so far from the older Christian heroic ideal that he enjoined on his disciples to go *inter Saracenos et alios infideles*<sup>1</sup>. But both preachers are far more remarkable because they deliberately set aside the thought of man's spiritual worthlessness. Human beings might be perverted by heresy, or they might, like St Francis himself in his youth, have lost touch with their own immortal spirits among the vanities of the world. But all men were alike in having within them some spark of God, and those who recognised the sacred flame in others, even the lowest, had found the best way to cherish it in themselves. Hence the gospel of love and of service and the ardent desire to roam the earth barefooted, preaching to men of all classes from lepers to princes. The overwhelming personality of St Francis, who, despite his medieval extravagances, still seems to live like a man whom we have seen and known, rather blinds us to the significance of his mission. He had given men victory over their despondency by means of a thought. This doctrine enabled them to look through the vices and sinfulness which seemed to be fastening on to the human race, and to distinguish the divine touch of virtue beneath. It could be found in birds and flowers, not less than in men. As we have seen in every chapter of this inquiry, some such secret reliance or confidence is the beginning of all greatness, and there is no doubt that this inspiring and creative idea contained the germ of a new age of action and progress.

But it will also not be forgotten that the spectacle of man's baseness is not to be obliterated at one stroke, by a single message, however persuasive and inspiring. The sins of the Middle Ages were continually combining into new forms and insidiously pressing themselves upon the consciousness of mankind. As Roger Bacon confessed, *verum et bonum uno modo sunt, falsum autem cuilibet vero oppositum et malum cuilibet bono contrarium infinitis modis variantur*<sup>2</sup>. So the doctrine of divine

<sup>1</sup> *Prima Regula.*

<sup>2</sup> *Opus Majus*, Pars 1<sup>a</sup>, cap. vi.

love, in origin a piece of neo-Platonic mysticism, needed to be developed and consolidated and renewed in continually varying forms. In fact it was subsequently proved that much more ancient lore and learning must be added thereto, before men could lighten their ways in those gloomy times. Yet St Francis had, apparently, no inkling of these necessities. St Dominic might possibly have supplied the want, for he was born in Old Castile and had learnt from the dominion of the Moors how much to dread from heresy. He had besides been trained in the colleges of Palencia, and in 1206 had founded a school in Prouille<sup>1</sup>. But the practices of religious mendicancy had impressed him from his youth and had prepared him for the influence of St Francis under which he fell in later life. So it was the saint from Assisi who began by dominating the movement, and though he dispatched the Christian warrior on a new enterprise, he still armed him with the old weapons. Like the monasteries of the later Middle Ages, especially the Cistercians, he cared nothing for culture. Destiny and the mystery of evil presented him with no difficulties. He met the consciousness of sin with the obligation to penitence, and he met all the temptations of the flesh and the Devil with a vow of such complete personal and corporate poverty that no inducement was left to do wrong. And if there was danger of doubting or rebellious thoughts, were not the brethren too occupied in the duty of incessant preaching to give them a foothold? Such a message won people by its sheer simplicity as well as by the Christ-like magnetism of its founder, and it is said that St Francis reviewed in the plain near Assisi no less than five thousand representatives of his order nine years after he had gone to Rome with his eleven disciples to obtain authorisation from Innocent III<sup>2</sup>. But when this first wave of enthusiasm began to subside, and the inevitable frailties and misjudgments of even the most devoted disciples began to reappear, and the puzzling persistency and mystifying complexity of evil became again manifest—how did St Francis enable us to reckon with these disconcerting difficulties? In 1212 thousands of children

<sup>1</sup> H. B. Workman, *The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal*, vi, § 1.

<sup>2</sup> Probably in 1210. See Sabatier, *St Francis*, p. 88 n.

seemed to catch the enthusiasm of the Friars and marched off under the leadership of two boys to recover the Holy Land, but were beguiled on board ship at Marseilles and sold into slavery<sup>1</sup>. Even those who had no personal interest in the enterprise must have felt as if their hopes had collapsed. The contrast between the inspired beginning and the infamous conclusion was too marked. We hear, too, of shipmasters who, having contracted to take pilgrims as passengers to their port, either starved them to death or sold them as slaves to the Saracens<sup>2</sup>. It must have seemed as if the world was too overgrown with possibilities of evil to leave man much hope of regeneration through the power of the spirit. How did the "Orders of Brothers Preachers" or the "Brothers Minor" equip you to face such disillusionments without losing faith in the ultimate triumph of man through God? They enjoined an empty head and a shivering body. To the sense of spiritual and mental helplessness they added the consciousness of physical humiliation. Without the most fiery enthusiasm, acting on the most sensitively sympathetic temperaments, it was impossible to conquer life solely through the doctrine of divine love. Only the most ardent *zelatores* could triumph with these aids alone.

Such was the influence of St Francis himself, but some of his immediate followers appear to have seen further than he did. Even Elias of Cortona, his successor, perceived that Christian invincibility must be founded on intellect and the power of reason. No doubt it was soon realised that the missionary activities of the order would be limited to the humblest and most ignorant audiences unless the preachers were grounded in theology and were able to argue, refute and convince. No doubt some impulse came from the Canons Regular of St Augustin, the so-called "Austin Canons," who observed corporate and individual poverty and communal seclusion from the world, but admitted clerics to their order

<sup>1</sup> See G. Z. Gray, *The Children's Crusade*, New York, 1898. See account by Alberic in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, xxiii, 893; *Annales of Ogerius Panis*, *ibid.* xviii, 131.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques de Vitry, *Hist. Occid.* (extract transl. by G. G. Coulton, *Medieval Garner*, p. 198).

and preserved a tradition of learning and science. The famous scholar Anselm had founded the first Austin priory in England in 1108, and Norman, its first prior, had stocked the library with books. The congregation of St Victor had been founded c. 1110 by William de Champeaux, the opponent of Abelard, and had produced many theologians and controversialists<sup>1</sup>. No doubt a further impulse came from the Crusades which established intercourse with the Arabs and so brought westward Greek science and philosophy together with the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture and commerce. Yet in a sense these are contributory causes. They undoubtedly served the real motive, they may even have inspired it. But the impulse was nevertheless more fundamental. The age had realised that the older sources of epic heroism had failed them and that if in these debased times men were to win a sense of human grandeur and exaltation, it must be by understanding the nature of sin and the means of rising superior to its influence. As Geoffrey de St Barbe said in the thirteenth century, *clastrum sine armario quasi castrum sine armentario*. St Francis made possible such an effort by proving that the love of God was the most universal and powerful thing in life. It was left to his followers and to the Dominicans to avail themselves of this assurance, and build up therefrom a well-reasoned conception of how great and sinless human beings might yet become.

This movement, the next phase in the conquest of fear and in the progress of the epic spirit, came to fruition with the founding and development of the universities, and so it has often been ignored or misunderstood. As we of the twentieth century are naturally more interested in ourselves than in anything else, and as we also regard what is best in our civilisation as founded on scientific knowledge, we are inclined to regard medieval education only from these points of view. We generally look almost exclusively for the beginnings of modern thought and if we must have a hero, we choose such investigators as Berthold Schwartz or Roger Bacon, who

<sup>1</sup> Heimbucher, *Die Orden u. Kongregationen der kath. Kirchen*, 2te Ausg. 1907, II, 21-49.

foreshadowed the modern spirit with *quod per auctoritates probatum est experientia cuius libet certius dijudicatur*<sup>1</sup>. We are apt to forget that another more determined and sustained effort, carried on through many centuries, came to a head at the same time and in the same university centres. This movement aimed at nothing less than the possession of the *spiritus veritatis*<sup>2</sup>—intimacy with God and insight into divine holiness. Such is what they meant, in the Middle Ages, by The Truth; and they proposed to win this prize by a combination of intense study, profound contemplation and rigorous self-discipline. We shall find that by an hieratic tradition of thought and research, handed on through many generations, there arose in the later Middle Ages a new heroic ideal, a conception of human beings not only overcoming the greatest difficulties of their age and attaining by courage and perseverance to the highest imaginable pitch of excellence, but achieving that mastery of themselves, that confidence and spiritual sureness, which are the essence of true heroism.

These qualities, like all heroic attributes, were evolved in the course of a protracted and ultimately victorious struggle, and, as we have already hinted, the adversaries to be overcome were the decadent and evil tendencies of the age. If it be objected that such abstractions cannot possibly fill the place of some recognised epic enemy such as Hektor aided by Zeus, or Polyphemos, or Grendel, or Abisme or Hagen, let it be remembered that none of the figures of heroic poetry are historical. Some of them may once have been so, but by the time that the poet has given them their final form, they are symbols and embodiments<sup>3</sup>, and their reality depends on the qualities which they evoke in others. So it was with the problem of Evil. Its manifestations were so many that to the medieval imagination it often assumed a concrete shape, and we shall have occasion later to notice some attempts to visualise what was so much feared and hated. There is something of an epic ring in the cry “*Estote fortes in bello et pugnate cum antiquo serpente.*” Frère Lorens compared flatterers to *nicors* or

<sup>1</sup> *Opus Majus*, Pars 1<sup>a</sup>, cap. iii.

<sup>2</sup> *Si John* xiv, 16, 17; see *post*, chap. ix.

<sup>3</sup> *Ante*, chap. i, § 3.

mermaids, or to the adder "Serayn" that is swifter than a horse, or the vampire-like hyena which ferrets out buried corpses<sup>1</sup>. The author of *Ancren Riwle* compared life to a wilderness in which we journey towards the kingdom of Heaven and meet on our way with wild beasts and huge reptiles which are the seven deadly sins and their whelps. But these and such like incarnations are not for the most part characteristic of the best thought of the time. Among the more earnest and enlightened minds, the influence of sin was felt to be too penetrating and elusive to be so easily materialised. As they came into contact with its baneful energies, they condensed them into an idea, abstract indeed, but charged with the malignity of a living thing; the doctrine of Original Sin.

For the same reason the old horror of the Antichrist was not adapted to express the sentiments of the later Middle Ages. This spectre—*l'épouvantail de la conscience chrétienne, le géant sombre du soir du monde*<sup>2</sup>—arose out of Nero's reign of terror, and we should expect its sinister immortality to be assured by the authority of the *Apocalypse*. Yet apart from Malvenda's *De Antichristo*, it is surprising how little attempt is made to keep the monster's memory alive. From the twelfth to the fourteenth century men of learning had to wrestle with a more subtle adversary. The mood of the time finds its best expressions in the opening sentences of Dante's *Convivio*—*Onde, acciò che la scienza è ultima perfezione de la nostra anima, ne la quale sta la nostra ultima felicitade, tutti naturalmente al suo desiderio semo subietti. Veramente da questa nobilissima perfezione molti sono privati diverse cagioni, che dentro a l'uomo e di fuori da esso lui rimovono da l'abito di scienza.*

<sup>1</sup> Ayenbite, "Of blindinge."

<sup>2</sup> Renan, *Antichrist*.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE INCEPTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN

WE must now make some effort to understand how the belief in Original Sin first came into men's thoughts; how it gradually overspread the whole course of European civilisation; how it engendered some of the strangest fancies associated with human speculations; by what sustained and heroic efforts of the intellect the obsession was at last conquered. The inquiry will prove to be well worth while. We shall gather new ideas on the history of early European thought; we shall be able to discern some fresh aspect of the transition from the ancient to the modern world; we shall perhaps gain a more intimate insight into the purpose and culmination of medieval culture.

i. *The belief in the degeneracy of man is at least as old as Homer. All through the ancient world men recognised the fact and found means to counteract it. Amongst other correctives we find the mystery religions. These cults brought with them the tendency to allegorise phenomena and to regard perplexities as symbols which could be interpreted. So mankind reached something like equanimity towards the end of paganism.*

To find the origin of the idea we should probably need to find the origin of civilisation. Ancient Greece was certainly no stranger to such thoughts. Homer believed that the greatest of all heroes were miserable because they were less than gods, and that the warriors of his own age were less than the greatest<sup>1</sup>. Hesiod<sup>2</sup> believed that the men of his time were infinitely less than the Homeric heroes, and Herodotus<sup>3</sup> represents the kings and generals of a later time as being too purblind and passion-ridden to understand the dark sayings in which the eternal powers envelop their purposes. So the conviction of human

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, vol. i, chap. iii, § 9.  
<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* § 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, vol. i, chap. vi, § 2.

folly and baseness had been handed on. Probably the collapse of the Greek city state with its vanished ideals of patriotism and culture, and the development of commercialism and Roman world power<sup>1</sup>, added very good reasons for this tradition of pessimism, and if the reader looks for the culmination in some concrete instance, uninfluenced by Christianity, he will find it in the prosaic Pausanias's<sup>2</sup> outburst on the vanished glories of the Golden Age, on the causes of modern decadence and on the retribution reserved for the wicked in the future.

But in these, the last few centuries before and during the dawn of the Christian era, men were no more contented than at other times to contemplate their own misery or defencelessness. As Clement of Alexandria says, there is rooted deep in man the instinct to look to Heaven<sup>3</sup>. Even writers as far apart as Herodotus and Ovid talked about Providence<sup>4</sup>. In fact, before the dawn of Christianity, serious-minded men, first Greeks and then Romans, seem to have been occupied with the problem of explaining and counteracting sin. Involved in these gloomy and disquieting speculations, they seem to have called to their help the ancient practices and beliefs associated with the worship of Demeter, Orpheus and Dionysos, whether preserved in their own traditions, especially at Eleusis, or communicated by devotees from Egypt and Asia. We have already seen that these mysteries played an important part in the classical ideas of the next world<sup>5</sup>, but it now remains to note that in other ways their influence must have been immense. Philip of Macedon met his future wife at a celebration<sup>6</sup>; St Paul is supposed to have been initiated; so is Clement of Alexandria<sup>7</sup>; Julian the Apostate was a votary<sup>8</sup>. Undoubtedly a whole history of imaginative effort lies hidden behind the few scattered indications which have come down to us<sup>9</sup>. Above

<sup>1</sup> G. Ferrero, *Grandezza e Decadenza di Roma*.

<sup>2</sup> viii, ii, 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Προτρεπτικὸς πρὸς Ἑλλήνας, II.

<sup>4</sup> III, 108, τοῦ θείου ἡ προνοΐη; *Metam.* I, 48, *Cura Dei*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. viii, § 5.

<sup>6</sup> Plut. *Vit. Alex.* II.

<sup>7</sup> T. R. Glover, *Conflict of Religions*, chap. ix.

<sup>8</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, xxiii.

<sup>9</sup> For latest views on the subject see S. Angus, *The Mystery-Religions and Christianity*, 1925; G. Berquer, *Some Aspects of the Life of Jesus* (transl. by E. S. and V. W. Brooks).

all we may be sure that the effectiveness of the ritual must have depended on the mental attitude of the votary; the indispensable requisite in his conversion must have been ardent aspiration. So we are not surprised to see that the enthusiasm inspired by mystery-worship seems to have given a new direction to the progress of culture.

We notice that after the cult of the mysteries had been established for a few generations, serious-minded people began to feel a certain dissatisfaction with art and literature for their own sakes. Solon, who was fond of demonstrations and spectacles and was always ready to learn, was nevertheless alarmed when he saw the dramatic performances of Thespis, and feared that the spirit of unreality might enter into men's serious business<sup>1</sup>. Aristotle seems still to have felt that tragedy and epic poetry were not circumscribed within the limits of their story but somehow brought with them a universal spirit which might enter every one of us<sup>2</sup>. But Plato had already suspected that style was the flattery of the soul<sup>3</sup>, that poets were imitators of appearances and fomenters of self-pity, if not the reporters of events which had never taken place<sup>4</sup>. The aim of Lucretius was to free men from *terrorem animi tenebrasque*. But how? Not by reading Aischylos. Though gifted with all the sensibilities of a poet, he insisted on *naturae species ratioque*. Even Cicero, in his famous apology for poets, has really nothing else to say except that they are a healthy relaxation<sup>5</sup>. From the age of Herodotus onward to the Christian era thinkers seem to have been acutely conscious of the presence of abstract and invisible forces around them. On the one hand we have the teaching of Herakleitos, that Truth (δ *λόγος*) was a single element common to all<sup>6</sup>, but only to be found and understood by the comparison and analysis of phenomena, not by the mere acquisition of knowledge<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand we have the insistence on the paradox that life was death, and

<sup>1</sup> Plut. *Vit. Sol.* xxix.

<sup>2</sup> *Poet.* 1-4, 6-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Gorgias*, 501-5.

<sup>4</sup> *Repub.* 595-608. (Joubert's reply to Plato shows that the Frenchman, like so many other moderns, looks to poetry for the same insight and enlightenment as the Greek sought in metaphysics. See "De la Poésie" in J. Joubert, *Pensées, précédées...d'une notice...par P. de Raynal*, 2 vols.)

<sup>5</sup> *Pro Archia.*

<sup>6</sup> *Frags.* 2, 89, 113, 114.

<sup>7</sup> *Frags.* 1, 40.

death might be the door to life<sup>1</sup>. Wishing to grasp these elusive though all-pervading influences, large numbers seem to have resorted to the mysteries and many others, perhaps without becoming initiates, yet found in the methods and spirit of the mysteries, their surest guides. We know very little about the ceremonies and ritual of these cults, but it seems unquestionable that they offered a means by which a man's soul could be prepared for contact and intercourse with God, and this process of cleansing and purification must certainly have been connected with symbolism. Initiates had to perform certain acts, handle certain objects, be entrusted with certain secrets. Possibly oracular utterances, as enigmatical as any which Herodotus records, had to be understood and acted upon. So we suppose, for as we approach and enter upon the Roman era we find that sculpture, painting and literature are more and more relegated to the world of limited and practical considerations. They are regarded as ornaments, diversions, materials for developing the language and practising rhetoric. So they still occupy a large place in education and perhaps in society. But the kind of humanists who might have looked to poetry and statuary to give expression to their deeper aspirations, were turning to mystic philosophy or to symbolic interpretation as to another and more illuminating kind of art. Thus Metrodorus in the fifth century B.C. allegorised Homer<sup>2</sup>, or Plutarch in the second century A.D. explained as a parable of ambition the myth of Ixion who embraced a cloud instead of Hera and so begot the centaurs<sup>3</sup>.

It is surprising how far men advanced by these means in the principles of understanding and interpreting supernatural powers. Nor did they therefore abandon the search for scientific knowledge, or sacrifice the exercise of reason. You can discover the cause of a phenomenon without losing sight of its significance. When mortals ring bells or light beacon fires, we do not content ourselves with explaining the means by which these effects are produced. We go on to ask what message is being conveyed to us by the demonstration.

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Plato, *passim*; Eur. *Polyidos*, *Frag.* 638.

<sup>2</sup> Tatian, *xxi.*

<sup>3</sup> *Vit. Ag.* 1.

Similarly when we find a stag with only one horn, we may, like Anaxagoras, cut open the animal's head and discover the anatomical cause of the prodigy, but that is no reason why we should not also go on to interpret the prophetic significance of the *monstrum*, as did the prophet Lampon<sup>1</sup>. Thus before the battle of Pydna, when there was an eclipse, though Aemilius well understood the scientific explanation, yet he would not join battle till he had obtained a favourable response to his repeated sacrifices<sup>2</sup>. We have seen in Herodotus how profoundly men were impressed with the problem of finding out the will and intention of the gods<sup>3</sup>. We learn from Apuleius how they solved this problem<sup>4</sup>. It was supposed that there were certain divine middle powers, situated between the highest ether and the earth, who acted as intermediaries between men and gods, especially influencing omens and prodigies. Among others there is a class of daemons, nobler than the rest, who preside over the powers specially connected with man's spirit. From among these beings one is allotted to each mortal as witness and guardian of his life and arbitrator of his thoughts. This attendant could avert evil, bring good and strengthen man's spirit. The problem of existence was to live in complete harmony with this divine monitor. One who so succeeded had solved the riddle of existence; he was no longer at the mercy of Fortune. In fact the worship of Fortune may have ended as the cult of this daemon. When Amasis warned Polykrates that his luck would change, he spoke of τὸ θεῖον<sup>5</sup>. But when Plutarch records how Sulla attributed more to Fortune than to merit, the word used is δαιμων<sup>6</sup>. In the same way the Egyptian astrologer told Antony that his luck yielded to Caesar's by saying that the one δαιμων was humbled in the presence of the other<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Plut. *Vit. Perik.* vi; cf. *ibid.* xxxv; *Vit. Kleo.* xxxix.

<sup>2</sup> Plut. *Vit. Aem.* xvii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ante*, vol. i, chap. vi, § 7.

<sup>4</sup> *On the God of Socrates*. For full analysis see T. R. Glover, *Conflict of Religions*, p. 231.

<sup>5</sup> Herod. II, 40.

<sup>7</sup> *Vit. Ant.* xxxiii.

<sup>6</sup> *Vit. Sull.* vi

ii. *The Gospel of St John, followed by gnosticism, raised still higher the hopes of intercourse if not contact with divinity. Even after extravagances had been refuted, the intellectual tradition remained. Especially the desire to establish direct communion with God. This exaltation of the spirit was to be achieved by pure and abstract thought; failing that by allegory and mysticism.*

Thus by the end of paganism, some schools and sects must have reached something like an equilibrium; a state of mind in which they had attained not indeed happiness but a degree of certainty about their position in the scheme of things, their powers, their limitations, their prospects. The more ardent mystics may have believed that the gulf between human and divine could not only be measured but even bridged. Christianity must have begun by adding a gleam of ineffable hope to these consolations. The *Gospel of St John* taught that Divine Reason, a part of God, had entered a mortal body; so that all who believed in this mystery were considered to be already in direct communication with God. By and by the Holy Spirit or Comforter (*παράκλητος*) would enter those thus prepared, and the union would be complete<sup>1</sup>. This conviction was strengthened by Oriental syncretism and Babylonian myths, and reached its climax among the sect which Irenaeus in *Adversus Haereses* named gnostics (*γνωστικοί*). Men like Basilides, Karpokrates, Valentinus and Herakleon recognised to the full the existence of evil and the incompleteness of the world created by the Demiurge and controlled by inferior spirits. They even admitted that men might become *ἰλικοί*, mere slaves of matter. But they also insisted that we could become and were *ψυχικοί*, in whom the soul predominated, or even *πνευματικοί*, in whom the breath of God still lived. So they maintained that the seeds of divine perfection were within us. A gnostic claimed to be *όμοούσιος* with Christ and needed only the *γνώσις Θεοῦ* to complete the lost union with God. Of course these doctrines soon provoked opposition. Tertullian<sup>2</sup> in particular argued against their intellectual

<sup>1</sup> E. Gebhart, *L'Italie Mystique*, 2<sup>e</sup> éd. 1893, chap. II, § 1.

<sup>2</sup> *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, XIV.

self-sufficiency and irrepressible curiosity, when a *regula fidei* had already been established. Gnosticism also dissented from the established doctrines on the resurrection and immortality of the soul. But all the same the hope of regeneration through thought and spirit, which reached its most extravagant phase in this heresy, was of immense importance to the Christianity of the second century.

Anyone who has read<sup>1</sup> *The Life of St Antony* by Athanasius, *The Paradise of the Fathers* by Palladius, *The Rule of Pachomius* and *The History of the Monks* by Hieronymus, will realise how nearly Christianity in its abhorrence of impurity became overcast by the thought of the Devil. It was an old established belief that gods or daemons, who entered human beings, made their presence felt. If a deity entered a body and stayed there, obviously the body would be permanently transfigured. Now the new god was thought. Therefore the thoughts of the possessed must be perpetually pure and divine. Any intrusion of impure or even worldly sentiments was a sign that the possession was incomplete and that the Devil, the daemon of the senses, was himself gaining a foothold. Such a doctrine was especially disturbing to men of peasant origin, like St Antony, whose minds had not already been refined by hereditary influences. But intellectuals found a powerful resource in the tendency to mysticism and allegory which had come down to them with classical civilisation. We can still gather some idea of their needs from what has survived in the so-called *Corpus Hermeticum*<sup>2</sup> and in the excerpts which Stobaeus collected and preserved in the sixth century. So the once despised faith was eagerly embraced by thoughtful and cultivated men who clung to their belief in the spirit, and were convinced that there was a hidden meaning in phenomena. Clement, bishop of Rome, speaks of Christian knowledge in the gnostic sense of a secret conferring supernatural power<sup>3</sup>. In the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the crucifixion is likened to the

<sup>1</sup> Accessible to the general reader in *The Paradise of the Fathers*. Translations by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, 1907.

<sup>2</sup> W. Scott, *Hermetica*, with Engl. Transl. and Notes, vol. I.

<sup>3</sup> γνῶσις, *I Cor.* xlvi. See Lake's note, *Apost. Fathers*, Loeb Classics, vol. I, p. 93.

riddance ceremony of loosening the scapegoat. It is significant how readily enigmatical or sibylline oracles were cultivated, whether invented expressly or gathered from the collection known as *Sibylline Oracles* which some Jews began to form in Egypt in the second century B.C., and to which Christians continued to contribute till the seventh century A.D.<sup>1</sup>

But more important still was the value placed on allegorical interpretation. The first impulse had of course come from the parables of the *New Testament*, but these stories are merely picturesque and figurative renderings of doctrine, so done because attractive and easy to understand. The parables which appeal to the second century are inspired by the riddling spirit. Clement of Alexandria allegorised even the *Proverbs of Solomon* and the parable of the rich man who had great possessions<sup>2</sup>. Like the oracles which Herodotus records, these inspired utterances depend on the mood and outlook of the learner. As is explained in *The Shepherd of Hermas*<sup>3</sup>, the inquirer's mind must be cleansed of all passions and distractions, just as the vineyard must be cleared of thorns and weeds, if either is to bear fruit. Men absorbed by their own business cannot understand even if they are willing to learn.

So Christianity had developed into a triumph of the unseen. God was *νοητὸν οὐκ αἰσθητόν*<sup>4</sup> and to understand His word was to think in His image<sup>5</sup>. Much was made of the text "the spirit of the Lord is a lamp searching the inward parts,"<sup>6</sup> and it was realised that this ethereal influence could literally take possession of the thoughts and emotions, without the clumsy and delusive intermediaries of art or literature<sup>7</sup>. In this atmosphere of religious exaltation it must have seemed sheer madness to concern oneself with statues or poetry for their own sake. The chief aim of the initiate was to escape from the

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Clement of Rome, *II Cor.* xii, also quoted from Cassianus by Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* iii, 13 (Lake, *op. cit.* vol. i, p. 147); also *Ep. of Barnabas*, xi, xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Exhortation to the Greeks*, viii, "who is the rich man who is being saved?" v, x, xi.

<sup>3</sup> *Mand.* x, 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> "An object of thought not of sight," Clem. of Alex. *Exhortation to the Greeks*, iv, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* x.

<sup>6</sup> *Prov.* xx, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Clem. of Rome, *I Cor.* xxii.

limitations of the material world and to attain to the realms of pure thought. Even pagans like Plutarch had believed that contact with God was possible by means of pure intelligence aided by the study of philosophy. But this unworldliness was not possible unless the soul continued capable of desiring ardently that abstract beauty which cannot be described to men and for which (according to the myths) Isis yearned<sup>1</sup>. Nay more, though an antiquarian and humanist, he agreed with Plato that poets could be wilful liars, and that much in literature was uttered under the pressure of passion or error, and could influence us only when in a similar mood. In fact he valued literature solely as an exercise in moral selection, much as different animals find each its peculiar nutriment in a field open to all<sup>2</sup>. No wonder Tertullian agreed with Plutarch that literature should not be read unless the student could select and omit according to his better judgment, and condemned the teaching of poetry<sup>3</sup>. If a picture or a tale could lead by allegory to the heights of pure thought, as Servius and Prudentius showed with Vergil, it was worth attention. Otherwise he would find all he needed in the story of the Gospel to help him to this austere ideal. The life of Christ would teach him how to shut the eyes of the heart to all earthly considerations and how to open them to the true nature of God. But to study form and style or cultivate the dexterities of the intellect, was merely to prevent oneself from attaining to clearness of spiritual vision.

Some such prejudice also helped to inflame the earnest Christian's hatred of idols. Of course he had other reasons. Pagan warriors such as Clodovech, king of the Franks<sup>4</sup>, objected that the God of the Christians was not even of divine extraction, much less of superhuman power, so Chrotechilde his Christian wife had to argue that the idols which he worshipped represented nothing but myths of lust, incest, cruelty and self-indulgence. Cynewulf probably had in mind this apparent disability of Christian theology when he dwelt so

<sup>1</sup> *Moralia*, "Isis and Osiris."

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* "How the young should study Poetry."

<sup>3</sup> *De Idol.* x.      <sup>4</sup> *Hist. Frank.* II, 29.

eloquently on the miracle of the immaculate conception<sup>1</sup>. But in the more tranquil and discursive atmosphere of the classical world, idols were also condemned because they had lost their imaginative appeal. To look at them was like looking at the heavens ὅψει μόνῃ πεπιστευκότες<sup>2</sup>. The dread of materialism had reached such a stage that Clement himself could see nothing in the greatest work of art, but the intention to deceive<sup>3</sup>.

III. *The cult of allegorical interpretation and intuition reach their climax in St Augustin. He discards completely the literary habit of thought, and studies the Scriptures by the light of mysticism. So he discovers the influence and pervasiveness of the Holy Spirit. Thus, following on the traducianism of Tertullian, he develops the doctrine of Grace.*

Thus mysticism and allegory became essential to Christian culture. But it is doubtful whether the older literary arts would have been so effectually banished for so long a period, or the newer and not very literary arts of symbolism and innuendo have been so firmly established in their place, had it not been for the career of St Augustin<sup>4</sup>. Though trained in literature, he discarded the literary point of view. He began by condemning his own *De Pulchro et Apto* because his thoughts went no further than objects of sight—*Ibat animus meus per formas corporeas*<sup>5</sup>—and he confesses that his first difficulty in religious speculation, was to think of God without form or substance, that is to say, not in terms of artistic and literary presentation. So for a while he fell into the error of the Academics<sup>6</sup>.

His conversion depended on his release from these mental restrictions. He learnt from St Ambrose that he had been “barking” not so much against the Catholic religion, as against the literary figures which he had been trained to expect—*contra carnalium cogitationum figmenta*<sup>7</sup>. So he turned again to the Scriptures and discovered that their simple and austere

<sup>1</sup> *Christ*, ll. 415–24.

<sup>2</sup> Clem. of Alex. *Exhort.* II.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* IV.

<sup>4</sup> For full history and discussion of the conversion of St Augustin, see Boissier, *Fin du Paganisme*. The sketch in the present work does not cover the same ground.

<sup>5</sup> *Confess.* IV, 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* V, 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* VI, 3.

language, innocent of all literary embellishments, was so intelligible that the mind could at once penetrate to their portentous secret, and its profound interpretation—*secreti sui dignitatem in intellectu profundiore servaret*<sup>1</sup>. At one time he compares the Scriptures to a spring, pent between narrow rocks, which nevertheless flows on to feed broad and branching rivers and so covers a continent<sup>2</sup>. When the study of the Scriptures is approached in this spirit, the true nature of God appears. Freed from all artistic associations the Divinity is conceived in a spirit of mysticism, not so much as a light, a power or a vital energy (though these metaphors are used), but rather as a stimulant to thought, as that which inhabits the intellectual side of man, the Spirit which enables the mind to see the Truth<sup>3</sup>. The most amazing illustration of this power is found, as Clement had already seen, in the Gospels; the story of a mortal body raised to a state of divine perfection by “The Word” which filled his mind<sup>4</sup>. When his eyes had been thus far opened to the Truth, the mystery of ecstatic communion was once revealed to him, in the presence of his mother<sup>5</sup>; and he made yet another step in the discovery of what God really is. God is not strictly a force outside the man, which can be perceived, not even the universal soul of which we are a part. God is *vita vitae*, the source whence mentality, vigour and spirituality receive their impulse<sup>6</sup>. He is no soul, but the soul’s maker<sup>7</sup>. Nay more, in these moments of spiritual lucidity, of perfect comprehension, it is not the human mind that is principally active. It is God Himself who fills the mortal with thoughts of God. *Qui per spiritum tuum vident ea, tu vides in eis*<sup>8</sup>.

Such speculations might very well have satisfied a convert of the first century or a gnostic of the second, or even a mystic philosopher of the third and fourth. But how would they commend themselves to a moralist of the early fifth, already convinced of the wickedness of man, one who need look no further than himself to see evidence of human degradation?

<sup>1</sup> *Confess.* vi, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* xii, 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* vii, 6, 8, 10; xi, 9; xii, 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* vii, 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* ix, 10; cf. *In Memoriam*, xciv.

<sup>6</sup> *Confess.* x, 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Civ. Dei*, i.

<sup>8</sup> *Confess.* xiii, 31.

Could man in any sense be believed to be made in God's image? Could the Spirit of God enter a human being's body without becoming defiled? Such difficulties were insoluble by the old methods, and while still under the influence of pagan culture, St Augustin had accepted the explanation of the Manichees and had for a while believed in the dual origin of Good and Evil.

One other explanation was possible: that man had once been perfect like all God's creations, but had been endowed with the power to choose Good from Evil and had preferred to sin. So wickedness (*iniquitas*) was a *summa substantia detortae in infima voluntatis perversitas*<sup>1</sup>. The materials for this belief were ready to hand<sup>2</sup>. Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom, and the other Fathers of the Greek Church believed that our race had once enjoyed the prospect of being something infinitely more spiritual and ethereal, but that through Adam's symbolical act of disobedience, we had now become subject to sin and mortality. Yet man was not crushed by his destiny; he could take, whenever he wished, the first step towards regaining his lost grandeur and felicity; and the struggle or pilgrimage was made glorious by the need of God's power to co-operate with the human will. But while the Eastern Church still cherished a not uninspiring idea of man's duties and dignity, the Latin Fathers were inclining more and more to despair of man's natural goodness, and to fear that their own species was, without grace, irrevocably lost. At the beginning of the third century Tertullian<sup>3</sup>, who was versed in stoic philosophy, regarded all existence as corporeal, even that of the soul<sup>4</sup>. Thus he persuaded himself that every man's spirit, like his body, was ultimately descended from Adam, and must inherit the taint of its progenitor—

<sup>1</sup> *Confess.* vii, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Among the innumerable authorities on the subject may be mentioned Dale, *Christian Doctrine*; Tennant, *The Fall and Original Sin*; Harnack, *History of Dogma* (transl.); Bright, *Age of the Fathers*; Mozley, *Predestination*; Neander, *Church History*; P. de Labriolle, *Hist. de la Litt. Latine Chrétienne*; R. E. Roberts, *The Theology of Tertullian*. An extremely useful discussion of the subject (to which the present writer is much indebted) will be found in *The Doctrine of Sin* by R. S. Moxon, 1922.

<sup>3</sup> Born 160, died 240.

<sup>4</sup> *De Carne Christi*, 11.

*tradux animae, tradux peccati.* Such was the origin of traducianism, yet Tertullian did not regard all men, much less infants, as utterly vitiated or unable to save themselves<sup>1</sup>, while his two followers, Cyprian of Carthage and Hilary of Poictiers, had even more confidence in the synergistic power of the will. Towards the end of the fourth century<sup>2</sup> Ambrose became more convinced of the decadence of the human race. He believed that our fate was identified with Adam's, that we all existed in him, and so shared both his sin and his death<sup>3</sup>. Yet even Ambrose believes that man still retains enough free will to turn of his own accord towards righteousness.

It remained for St Augustin to discover the ultimate possibilities of this doctrine, and it should again be noted that he reached his conclusions, not by the paths of human philosophy, but by intuition and symbolism. Bishop Avitus, when seeking to convert a colony of Jews, felt that the literal interpretation was like a veil before their eyes, and he prayed that they might be enabled to penetrate to the spiritual sense<sup>4</sup>. St Augustin might have uttered such a prayer. He returned to the Bible and studied the allegory of Chaos and of the Spirit of God brooding on the Abyss<sup>5</sup>. So he discovered the parable of our state of sin, of our rescue through Grace, and of God's desire that all his creations should be perfect<sup>6</sup>. Then he explains the *aenigma Trinitatis*<sup>7</sup> and learns how the soul of God gradually possesses, reforms and purifies the nature of man, rendered sinful by Adam's fall, just as the Spirit rested upon all the gulfs, wildernesses and bitter wild waters growing out of Chaos, and recreated them into the orderly, perfect earth<sup>8</sup>. Such is the revelation which comes to those enabled by God to penetrate the literal meaning and to reach the mystic significance below.

iv. *The teaching of St Augustin established the hope of an existence in this world filled with the Spirit of God and continued into the next with the resurrection of the body and an even more complete participation in divinity. On the other hand it convinced men that all succeeding generations had been*

<sup>1</sup> *De Baptismo*, 18.

<sup>2</sup> 374-97.

<sup>3</sup> *In Luc.* xv, 24.

<sup>4</sup> *Hist. Frank.* v, 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Gen.* i, 1; *Confess.* xii, 20-32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* xiii, 2-4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* xiii, 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* xiii, 6-12.

tainted by Adam's sin beyond hope of self-help. Pelagius failed to efface or weaken this conviction.

The effect of these doctrines on subsequent thought is incalculable. They brought with them an almost boundless measure of both hope and despair. On the one hand man was again enabled to rise to be something infinitely higher than any pagan deemed possible. It was indeed hardly less than the prospect of an apotheosis. God could enter man and transform him. At once the cruel pagan idea of pollution fell to the ground. There was no need for Oedipus to tear out his eyes, or for Lucretia to kill herself, for the body was sanctified by the sanctification of the will<sup>1</sup>. Again, the physical horrors of Death might now be defied. If the soul could become so blessed and sanctified by the influence of the Holy Spirit, it seemed impossible that the flesh also should not share this vitality by contact. In the *Revelation of Paul* the apostle saw the body of a righteous man brought to death, all his former good acts standing beside him. Good Angels took possession of his soul and said, "Take note of the body whence thou art coming out; for it is necessary for thee again to return to it in the day of the Resurrection, that thou mayest receive what God has promised to the righteous." Cynewulf held that so much of human nature—the thoughts of the heart, the memory of words and deeds—was inherent in the body, that if the spirit were filled with God the flesh also must be immortal<sup>2</sup>. Well might Augustin attack Apuleius of Madaura for holding in *De Deo Socratis* that the "airy" or Platonic spirits were better than men because their bodies were more perfect and because they lived in a purer element<sup>3</sup>. Such idealisation of human nature had already been conceived as possible. For instance, two centuries earlier it is argued in *The Shepherd of Hermas* that the flesh, which had harboured the Holy Spirit and had served it well, becomes itself immortal<sup>4</sup>, and that immediately after death the righteous might be transformed into angels<sup>5</sup>. But it was due to St Augustin's almost superhuman zeal and genius that the hope was firmly established.

<sup>1</sup> *Civ. Dei*, I, 15–18.

<sup>4</sup> *Sim.* v–vii.

<sup>2</sup> *Christ*, 2837.

<sup>5</sup> *Vis.* II. Cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, II.

<sup>3</sup> *Civ. Dei*, X, 14–20.

On the other hand, the same mighty apologist rendered the doctrine of Original Sin inevitable. Thanks to his immense powers of intuition, he penetrated the story of Adam's fall, and discovered in the fable the allegory and symbol of human destiny. So he riveted on to his age the conviction of human worthlessness. He taught that Adam was nothing less than the embodiment of all human beings, and that his sin was one collective act in which we all shared<sup>1</sup>. *In lumbis Adam fuimus*. Thus all mankind, in that one moment, became even as Adam himself was, a *massa perditionis*, and like his, all our souls were deprived of God's Grace. That is to say, we did not only, like him, incur the necessity of dying; our souls, cut off from that vitalising influence, also died, and we began to suffer the *peccatum poena peccati*, the anguish of losing touch with God<sup>2</sup>. Nay, more, while identified with Adam we enjoyed free will, but we chose voluntarily to fall. Thus by an act of volition we created sin out of nothing and absorbed it into our being. How can we then of ourselves recover? To cleanse our natures we should now have to usurp one of God's powers and create righteousness out of nothing<sup>3</sup>. Thus there is but little that man can do for himself. His will to righteousness has been utterly lost. He can only lie still and wish and wait for God to strengthen or rather to create his will. If the Divine Power so chooses to help a stricken mortal, the effect is marvellous. It is nothing less than the Holy Ghost entering the soul, inspiring it and awakening sympathy with the will of God, calling forth love in response to love<sup>4</sup>. But alas, this sacred vivifying virtue is not to be constrained. It is called Grace because it is *gratis donata*. *Gratia vero, nisi gratis est gratia non est*<sup>5</sup>. It is conferred arbitrarily; there is a *certus numerus electorum*, fixed by *decretum absolutum*. The rest remain paralysed by their own moral worthlessness.

Thus by the beginning of the fifth century the doctrines of Original Sin and of Predestination or Reprobation were established<sup>6</sup>. But by what strange fatality did such convictions

<sup>1</sup> *Op. Imperf.* I, 48.

<sup>2</sup> *De Pecc. Mer.* II, 22.

<sup>3</sup> *De libero Arbitrio*.

<sup>4</sup> *De Spiritu et Littera*.

<sup>5</sup> *Enchir.* 107.

<sup>6</sup> For development of the latter see *Enchiridion*, *De Corruptione et Gratia*, *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum*, *De Dono Perseverantiae*.

take hold of the human mind? Augustin's ultimate sanction was nothing more final than two disputed passages in the *Epistle to the Romans*<sup>1</sup>, and surely the world would not have long to wait before a more hopeful and humanistic generation re-explained these texts and abolished the ominous structure reared upon them. In fact the challenge came almost as soon as the Augustinian dogmas had been disseminated. Pelagius, fresh from Ireland or Wales, seems to have realised at once that the doctrines of Grace and of Original Sin were depriving most churchmen of the initiative and will to reform<sup>2</sup>, and so started the contention that all human beings are capable of saving themselves. His assertions met with some measure of acceptance in the more tolerant and hopeful atmosphere of the Eastern Church, but in the meantime at Carthage his disciple Coelestius actually constructed a new ethical system which allowed no place for the doctrine of Original Sin, and by this message of hope brought down on both of them the full opposition of the Western Church. Augustin, now at last alive to the growing danger, began his series of controversial treatises<sup>3</sup> and helped to procure Pelagius's condemnation by Pope Innocent. Zosimus his successor reversed the decision, but the great African Council of bishops convened in 418 unanimously condemned both the master and his disciple, the emperors Honorius and Theodosius upheld their verdict, and Zosimus, apparently overawed by the weight of opinion, now withdrew his support and issued his *Tractoria* condemning the disputed tenets. At this juncture Julian of Eclanum entered the lists on the side of the two condemned heretics, and after appealing to both Honorius and the pope, elaborated a complete defence in eight books. But the religious feeling of the time seems to have been so thoroughly convinced of Adam's sin and of his descendants' helplessness, that even the book itself is lost and served no other purpose than to provoke Augustin's reply on which he laboured till his death.

Thus what we know of pelagianism, except for Coelestius

<sup>1</sup> Chap. vii, 19 and 23, and the complaint of the Psalmist, *Ps. li*, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Pelag. *Ep. ad Demetr.*

<sup>3</sup> *De Peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvolorum*, *De Natura et Gratia*, *De Gratia Christi*, *De peccato originali*.

and Julian of Eclanum<sup>1</sup>, is based on the writings of its opponents. Yet even from these sources we get some idea of how welcome the rejected doctrines should have been. Assuredly their suppression should rank among the momentous failures which have influenced the destiny of mankind. Yet we cannot attribute the collapse of so manly and inspiring a creed solely to the zeal and genius of Augustin, still less to the sectarianism and influence of the African Church. In fact the doctrines of Original Sin and of traducianism retained their hold because they were symbols of a sentiment which was deeper and more widely spread. If the study of literature teaches anything at all, it demonstrates the human instinct for day-dreaming; the necessity for giving to our vaguer impulses and impressions an imaginative shape which, however romantic or fanciful, is at any rate definite. So the great characters of epic and drama grow to their final shape, and even less personified ideas are embraced and obstinately retained. Augustin and his followers were like magicians who conjure up in a palpable form the evil presence which they have long felt at work. They were attempting to visualise and confront at close quarters the besetting danger and weakness of their age.

v. *The vitality of the doctrine of Original Sin was due (as can be seen by comparison with stoicism) to the fact that it gave men something to fear and to fight. The decadence of the ancient world and the miseries following on the migrations gave mankind only too many reasons for adhering to the doctrine. Cassian was one of the first who showed how a new type of hero might be evolved capable of overcoming the hereditary taint.*

The needs and tendencies of the time will become clearer if the doctrine of Original Sin is compared with the teaching of Roman stoicism. The austerity, egoism and resignation of this pagan school have often been criticised, yet it cannot be denied that the followers of Zeno, Kleanthes and Chrysippus had something of the old heroic tradition and of the Christian devotion which took its place. Epiktetos seems to have thought

<sup>1</sup> See E. Jauncey, *The Doctrine of Grace up to the End of the Pelagian Controversy*.

of life as the preparation for some great struggle in which the combatant would have his one chance of showing his mettle<sup>1</sup>. He even advises his disciples to imagine themselves to be young athletes training for Olympia, an illustration which John Cassian<sup>2</sup> was fond of using, and when a difficult crisis arises, to imagine that God, the trainer, is wrestling with them for practice<sup>3</sup>. Again, he compares the most intimate and self-regarding efforts of man to the besieging or razing of a city<sup>4</sup>. Nay more, the mortal was called upon to swear allegiance to a leader, much as soldiers took their oath to Caesar<sup>5</sup>, and this service brought with it a peculiarly epic greatness. The Stoics' leader was God, and the philosopher, like an epic poet, turned to ancient beliefs for some tradition which could be idealised into a manifestation or proof of divine influence. So they found in the ancient doctrine of the *δαιμων*<sup>6</sup> the evidence that God exalted his soldiers and aided and accompanied them in their trials; for this attendant spirit and *alter ego* was now taken to mean the instinct for reason and clear-sightedness; in fact the voice of God Himself<sup>7</sup>. Thus their spirit was fortified by the sense of their obligations, their service, and the support of the divine ally. Only one thing was lacking: the conquest of fear. Yet that too was enjoined, for they were exhorted to fear not death but the fear of death<sup>8</sup>.

At the same time, stoicism cherished many of the ideals which were destined to serve the Christians well. The philosopher sought immunity from reckless and destructive actions, such as Medea's slaughter of her children, and the enjoyment of peace of mind, and claimed to find both by identifying his will with that of God<sup>9</sup>. Stoics believed themselves to be God's principal work, a fragment of God Himself, and consequently duty-bound to high and holy conduct, lest this portion of divinity within them should be defiled by unclean thoughts or acts<sup>10</sup>. Marcus Aurelius bent his whole will to cultivating "the

<sup>1</sup> *Disc.* I, 29.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. *De Coenobiorum Institutis*, xi, 318: "Athleta Christi, qui verum ac spiritalem certare desiderat."

<sup>3</sup> *Manual*, 29; *Disc.* I, 24.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* I, 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* I, 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ante*, § 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Disc.* I, 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* II, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* II, 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* II, 8.

Godhead within thy breast which has gained the empire over all thy impulses,"<sup>1</sup> and practised an unembittered detachment from the shows of the world, worthy of the profoundest Christians<sup>2</sup>. He had learnt to watch the stars in their courses, and to identify himself with their motions and to meditate on the changes of the elements and by such sublime studies to purify himself from the dross of earthly existence<sup>3</sup>. Besides, as we shall find in the later phases of Catholicism, both Epiktetos and Marcus studied to bring their will into harmony with events<sup>4</sup>, and saw that knowledge was the only way to consummate this ideal, and so aimed at knowing what really was the meaning of the Universe and of the power that governs it<sup>5</sup>. Some of the finest of Marcus Aurelius's meditations dwell on the need of a practised intellect<sup>6</sup>, and on the art of studying and observing<sup>7</sup>.

Yet stoicism produced very little effect, and these resemblances to both epic and Christian sentiments are worth emphasising, in order to bring out the essential difference of the Roman creed, and to explain its comparative failure. The Stoics, though they talked of contests and trials, yet found nothing to fight against. Epiktetos went so far as to maintain that it was a sign of ignorance to look to the world outside one for benefit or harm<sup>8</sup>. Whom should a man fear? At the most nothing more ghostly or irresistible than some hypothetical tyrant. Even the tyrant only *appeared* formidable to those who knew no philosophy. In fact the Stoics and Epicureans taught expressly that there was no foe to fear. It is not suggested that educated men and women of this age, whatever their sect or creed, could have kept before them the menace of some physical enemy. But at all times, even in the most prosperous or heroic ages (until we come to the twentieth century), there is a vague dread of insecurity; and this anxious uncertainty must find an outlet, generally in some symbolic form, blended with other spiritual needs. But neither stoicism nor epicureanism inspired a sense of victory or of release, or indeed any other

<sup>1</sup> *Med.* III, 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* VII, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* VII, 47.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. *Epikt. Disc.* II, 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* II, 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Med.* III, 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* III, 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Man.* xlvi.

grounds for enthusiasm. Their ideal was *ἀραραξία* or *ἀπάθεια*. They recognised that each human being had certain errors and misjudgments and prejudices to eradicate from his own mind, but beyond such introspection, they did not try to visualise a foe.

Such is the ideal of serenity. We have noticed how the Homeric warriors aimed at some such state of tranquillity and equipoise; how the consummation is reached in *Beowulf* and perhaps in the *Chanson de Roland*; and how acutely its lack is implied in the Greek conception of the intellectual hero. Perhaps serenity is the climax of all civilisations, but whether or no such a height could still be attained in the age of the Antonines, it passed out of man's reach soon afterwards. His aim was no doubt still the same. But before an age can enjoy the sense of immunity, all its spiritual and moral foes have to be faced and conquered. St Paul, perhaps borrowing the figure from these pagan philosophers, had said much about the Christian warrior, and had pointed out quite clearly who his enemies were. It is easy enough at this distance to see that by the fourth century another antagonist had arisen: the consciousness of social and corporate failure. Even in the days of Tacitus, it was being found impossible to live up to the old ideals. There was even then too little scope, under an imperial bureaucracy, for one's forensic, administrative and military talents and too much inducement to copy the methods of international financiers and to share their gains. From that time onwards the Roman Empire continued to relinquish its commerce, to relax its defences, to lose real interest in education and culture, and to care less and less for the efficiency of its government. The tendency to shirk public responsibilities, which Cicero had noted with indignation<sup>1</sup>, had become so flagrant that the *Curiales* had sometimes to be forced to serve on the councils of their city. As Gibbon says, "a secret but universal decay was felt in every part of the public administration,"<sup>2</sup> and he provides perhaps the most curious and striking proof when he records that after the reign of Gratian the legionaries gradually laid aside their defensive armour because

<sup>1</sup> *Respub.* i.

<sup>2</sup> *Decline and Fall*, xviii.

it was too heavy to wear<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile the civilised world had been converted to Christianity, and any doctrine of sin or even hint of human worthlessness would fall on fruitful soil. Could anything be more depressing than the thought that the type of perfect righteousness had been mistaken for a criminal and put to death with torture? In Cynewulf's *Christ* the first penalty of the damned is to realise the sin of the crucifixion, and the next punishment is actually to gaze on the sufferings of the Lord<sup>2</sup>. Besides, it was difficult to recognise the super-human purity and goodness of God, and to obey the injunction to humility and the confession of sins, without dwelling on one's moral worthlessness. Thus, though Tertullian insisted on the innate and essential goodness implanted in the soul by God<sup>3</sup>, yet he declared himself to be *peccator omnium notarum, nec ulli rei nisi penitentiae natus*<sup>4</sup>. When Constantine was converted and the despised and rejected faith became the established religion of the civilised world, it had looked as if the kingdom of Christ would be established on earth, but experience soon proved that men were no better than before.

This weariness and disillusionment had reached its last phase when Augustin was born and no man by temperament or circumstances was more qualified to give expression to the prevailing pessimism. He had made full trial of the culture of the past and of the decadent pleasures of the present. Is it surprising, after such experiences, that a man of his ardent and sensitive nature should assimilate a double portion of the prevailing gloom and bitterness? Was it not inevitable that a man of his constructive genius should gather together the symbols, formulae and habits of thought then in fashion and use them to express what he and his contemporaries felt so deeply? So it came about that the African convert's teaching grew into a parable, or at least into a manifesto of the world's deficiencies, and so it also followed that the staunchest supporters of Augustinianism were Latins, Africans or Spaniards and came from the districts most under the influence of ancient Roman culture and present-day Roman exhaustion. It is

<sup>1</sup> *Decline and Fall*, xxvii.

<sup>3</sup> *De Anima*, xli.

<sup>2</sup> II. 1061-1215.

<sup>4</sup> *De Paenitentia*, xii.

amazing what a picture St Augustin can draw of the physical and spiritual dangers to which man is exposed, even without alluding to the public disasters of his own time<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, Pelagius himself came southward from Ireland, Wales or Brittany, and met with least opposition in the East, where ideals were still cherished and life was less troubled.

But if Augustinianism was founded on decadence and disillusionment, succeeding generations had other but no less cogent reasons for adhering to its tenets. In the year A.D. 400, the invasion of the Barbarians, which had for so long threatened Rome like a thunderstorm, now seemed about to burst. At first God seemed to be on the side of the faithful and Stilicon defeated the invader in A.D. 406. Alaric reappeared in 408, and though Tuscan diviners persuaded Pompeianus, the prefect of the city, that by force of sacrifices and incantations, they could direct the lightning of the heavens against the Barbarians, the Senate still had enough confidence in their religion to refuse the help of heathenism<sup>2</sup>. St Augustin was still alive when Alaric at last entered Rome in A.D. 410; the once imperial city was captured and recaptured five times during the reign of Justinian, and Pelagius himself happened to be in the doomed city when it surrendered to Totila, king of the Goths, in A.D. 546, after a protracted siege. The fall of the capital of Christendom created a profound impression throughout the world, but those who still acknowledged the bond of a common religion and civilisation were not left to mourn the disaster from a distance. St Jerome describes how the Barbarians swarmed into Gaul and Spain<sup>3</sup>, and before the close of the fifth century the whole Roman Empire had been overrun by the Barbarians. The Vandals were masters of Africa, the Suevi and Visigoths occupied Spain, the Burgundians had invaded Gaul, the Ostrogoths ruled Italy. This collapse was followed by centuries of pestilence and of bloodshed, and these misfortunes are nearly always recorded by chroniclers and homilists who belonged to the older races now at the mercy of their conquerors. But there is no need to recapitulate

<sup>1</sup> *Civ. Dei*, xxii, 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Decline and Fall*, xxxi.

<sup>3</sup> *Epp.* LX, cxxxiii.

the often told story of Europe's journey through the Dark Ages<sup>1</sup>. It is enough to note that these periods of disease and death caused many to relapse into paganism, and the victories of the Barbarians only increased the discouragement of the Christians. How was it that the faithful were worsted and that their enemies triumphed? Salvius attempted to answer that question in *De Gubernatione Dei*. But he can only argue that civilised society had become so utterly corrupt as to deserve the retribution which God had meted out. It was not only that generation after generation was born into a life of privation and insecurity. These wars and counterwars swept away the corruption as well as the culture of the old order, but brought in their places the crimes which result from brutality and ignorance. The story of Clovis's descendants must be among the gloomiest pages of human history, while even Charlemagne probably outdid most Roman emperors in ferocity and licentiousness<sup>2</sup>.

Thus when once the doctrines of Original Sin and of Reparation had been established, there were only too many reasons for believing that their gloomy tenets must contain the truth. But were there no means by which mankind might make some progress towards escaping the curse of Adam? The spiritual history of the Middle Ages is largely an answer to that question. It is doubtful whether the human race, at any rate within the historical era, has ever been called upon to face more momentous issues. It was no mere question of holding certain creeds, or of following some particular school of thought. Men were called upon to discover some new way of realising themselves, of feeling the grandeur and greatness of human destiny, of recovering their lost confidence in life and action. Even before the collapse of the ancient world, while Pelagius was still struggling to retrieve his position, John Cassian of Massilia discovered a way. He admitted that all human beings inherit Adam's inclination to sin and must look to God's Grace to

<sup>1</sup> Among innumerable accounts, Taine's picture in *Philosophie de l'Art*, II, vi, 2, is perhaps the most graphic. Gregory de Tours gives a mournful recital in *Hist. Frank.* For pestilences see IV, 5, 31; V, 35; VI, 14; VII, 1; IX, 21, 22; X, 23. For brutality and coarseness V, 3; VI, 46; IX, 9.

<sup>2</sup> See Hallam, *The Middle Ages*, chap. I, pt I.

work their reformation, but held that this Grace is already bestowed upon all human beings—even the unbaptised since Christ died for all<sup>1</sup>—and will begin to exert its healing power as soon as the sinner takes the initiative and unites his efforts to those of the Holy Spirit<sup>2</sup>. Thus man's supreme duty was to learn how to co-operate with God, and in order to render him equal to this task, Cassian compiled his celebrated *De Coenobiorum Institutis* between A.D. 419 and 426, to show how the soul could be purified and prepared for its mission by monasticism. His plan was to apply in a softened and more humane form the systems which he had studied in Egypt and Palestine, and he expects from this devotionalism (*correctio morum*) to attain to nothing less than a *consummatio vitae perfectae*. He promises the young monk that he shall *ascendere consequenter culmina perfectionis*<sup>3</sup>. The greater part (v–xii) deals with the *collectatio octo principalium vitiorum*, and it is surprising how much he relies on the habit of self-control and the practice of mutual confession and encouragement. Amongst the other sins to be fought is pessimism—*edacis tristitiae stimuli retundendi sunt*<sup>4</sup>. These doctrines spread at once through the south of Gaul and for a time it looked as though Northern Europe would be guided by their courageous and hopeful spirit. But the world seemed too full of evil and the end seemed too near for mortals to entertain confidence in their own efforts or to dream of meeting God half way. So in 529 Caesarius summoned a Council at Arausio, and laid before the assembly the twenty-five doctrinal articles which he had received from Felix IV<sup>5</sup>. No attempt was made to reimpose the doctrine of irresistible Grace, but man's helplessness was clearly defined. Our free will, it was laid down, had become so debased that we were incapable of initiating a good action, and we must first, without any preceding merit on our part, be visited by God's Grace. Thus the doctrines, which were afterwards to be known as semipelagianism, failed for the moment, but Cassian had achieved a great victory for the human race. He had made clear the religious problem of the Middle Ages. Henceforth

<sup>1</sup> Prosper *apud Aug. Ep.* 224, 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Conf. xiii*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> iv, 8.

<sup>4</sup> ix, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Moxon, *The Doctrine of Sin*, chap. v, § 4.

the task before each human being was to prepare himself for the advent of divine aid, to learn the way of righteousness, to trust to *spiritualis meditatio* and *contemplatio re promissae beatitudinis*<sup>1</sup>, to keep every faculty ready so that when the impulse from God comes, the mortal can co-operate in the accomplishment of his salvation.

So *De Coenobiorum Institutis* inaugurated, or marked the inauguration of a new epoch. Cassian followed on and added to the gnostic doctrines and the spiritual idealism of the early Fathers. He showed how mysticism could be aided by intelligence. Of course the tradition of St Antony<sup>2</sup> was not entirely forgotten. As late as the eleventh century St Bruno founded the Carthusians on the aspiration *O beata solitudo! O sola beatitudo!* and the *Speculum Monachorum* by Arnulf of Beauvais enjoined complete seclusion<sup>3</sup>. No doubt the worldliness and corruption of the Church drove many of the more refined and intellectual to monasticism, and when they found that the monasteries also were full of unruly or unsuitable occupants, they retired to utter loneliness with God. Still Cassian pointed another way. He showed that the longing for righteousness could be satisfied, not so much by seeking out the Devil and confronting his enticements with ruthless austerities, as by seeking out God and preparing for the visitation of the Holy Spirit by a life of blameless endeavour. This teaching prepared the way for a new kind of hero. Cassian explained first of all what was the direst need of the time, and so he gave a purpose, a goal of achievement to his age. He also created some idea of the virtue, the moral equipment which a man required to win success, and so he created an ideal. It needed only that the pursuit and victory should bring with it a sense of grandeur and human worth, and an epic hero would be there, ready to catch the imagination.

<sup>1</sup> *De Coen. Inst.* ix, 13.

<sup>2</sup> On the *Vita Antonii* see H. B. Workman, *The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal*, App. A.

<sup>3</sup> See E. Gebhart, *L'Italie Mystique*, chap. 1.

## CHAPTER X

### MEDIEVAL CULTURE AND THE CONQUEST OF ORIGINAL SIN

WE have seen how the intellectual hero arose during the period stretching from Hesiod to Herodotus<sup>1</sup>, and how a similar type seems to have been admired in northern legends towards the close of paganism<sup>2</sup>. We have now to study the third appearance of this ideal during the Middle Ages. It may seem at first that we have merely to trace a tradition of monastic or ecclesiastical culture, originating with St Benedict and continuing till the fifteenth century, and in truth the ideal might have been realised much earlier. The reconciliation of the new faith with ancient culture was one of the earliest problems that confronted the Christian Church<sup>3</sup>. St Jerome's letter to Magnus, the teacher of rhetoric who blamed him so often for quoting heathen authors in support of Christian theology, declares that the writer is availing himself of the grace and wit of ancient wisdom, after purging it of all profanity, just as a man might marry a slave woman, after purifying her according to *Deuteronomy*<sup>4</sup>. The sermons<sup>5</sup> which St Ambrose preached at Milan on the six days of creation, owe almost as much to Vergil and Pliny as to theology. Such was the early impulse given to Christianity, but a strange fatality attended its continuation. The Church itself, under pressure of circumstances, kept introducing a spirit of worldliness. Even at the beginning of the seventh century Gregory I had found it necessary to make the throne of St Peter a temporal power, to acquire land and wealth and officials, and to create the kind of prestige which would be a defence against the lawlessness of the times<sup>6</sup>. Few if any of the spiritually-minded

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. vi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, chap. II, §§ 5, 6.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of this question see G. Boissier, *Fin du Paganisme*, Livre III. See also W. R. Halliday, *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ep. LXXXIII.*

<sup>5</sup> *I.e. Hexaemeron.*

<sup>6</sup> E. Gebhart, *L'Italie Mystique* (2<sup>e</sup> éd. 1893), chap. I.

seemed able to develop their aspirations in so spacious a field of action. Gregory himself, when pope, used to regret the days which he passed as a simple monk, still able to break through the bonds of the flesh by contemplation, and bitterly complained that the virtues of the mind were entangled in the affairs of laymen. When sent as *nuncio* to Constantinople, he kept some of his brother monks with him, comparing himself to a ship tossed on the troubled sea of worldly affairs and needing the calm anchorage of monastic prayer<sup>1</sup>. So instead of the spiritual adventurer, the intellectual type of this period is rather the recluse, attracted to the rule of St Benedict with its doctrine of obedience and self-suppression.

We have seen how the eleventh and twelfth centuries nearly witnessed the reconciliation of the temporal and spiritual ideals. Take such a character as William the Conqueror. Under the year A.D. 1087, the author of the *Old English Chronicle* describes his character. We are told of his severity and sternness, how he spared not his own brother Odo; how he built castles, afflicted the poor, oppressed the rich, and terrorised the whole kingdom by his force of character. We might almost be reading a description of Maximin, whose physical feats Gibbon describes, remarking that in an earlier age the peasant emperor might have become an epic hero<sup>2</sup>. William might have become the epic hero of his own age. He differs from earlier tyrants in that he also fulfilled a Christian ideal. He erected and endowed a monastery on the field of Senlac; he encouraged the foundation of a monastery at Canterbury; he filled England with Benedictine monks. He considered the administration of the English Church to be one of his functions as chief of the realm. It matters not that his motives may have been purely secular; his ends benefited the clergy and, above all, he accustomed people to expect that both Church and State might one day find their hero in the same man. The Church furnished an even more striking example in the character and career of St Anselm. In the *De Libero Arbitrio* he contended that the same Adam, who vitiated all our species, must bear the guilt of our inherited sin, while the individual may be pure of heart,

<sup>1</sup> Bede, *Hist. Eccl.* II, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Decline and Fall*, chap. vii.

may be free to choose good or evil, and may even by his own volition attain to righteousness. In *Cur Deus Homo* he not only vindicated the majesty of Christ and loving-kindness of God the Father, but even asserted the dignity of human nature, and the rehabilitation of man as a divine being. Surely the times were ripe for the abolishing of Original Sin when a generation produced such works as these. Moreover, the author was no anchorite or ascetic but an able administrator, the archbishop of Canterbury, who understood the temporal needs of his time and stood between William Rufus and his oppression of the clergy.

This alliance of the temporal and the spiritual reached its climax in the earlier crusades and then rapidly decayed. We have discussed the decline of epic sentiment in the later Middle Ages<sup>1</sup>, and we have seen how the first generation of friars failed to combine a sense of human power and dignity with their heaven-sent zeal<sup>2</sup>. And so, as the rising middle class widened their vision with their increasing interests and opportunities, they found the curse of Original Sin lying as heavily on their enthusiasm as it had laid on the hopes of former generations. To face this ancient spectre, they gathered together all the wisdom and experience of their forefathers, but they added of their own a sublime confidence in the human intellect and a pride in reason, which had not yet fully been brought to bear on the problem except by Boethius. So it was that the greatest of them rose to the height of epic vision. At the same time the effort was less a start in a new direction, than the resumption of a course which had been abandoned. It was like completing in a spirit of magnificence a structure which had been already begun. We must first see what materials had been prepared and how far the shell of the building had been formed.

*i. Boethius had demonstrated the power of the intellect in facing moral problems and acquiring peace of mind.*

The policy of fighting the Devil with scholarship as well as with piety, dates back to the middle of the sixth century when Cassiodorus imposed on his monastery at Viviers the duty of

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. vii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, chap. viii, § 6.

preserving and disseminating the remains of ancient literature. His dream was to found schools in which the mind could be purified and trained as effectively as the soul<sup>1</sup>. But the labours of those cenobite penmen and transmitters would have exercised far less influence on posterity, had not another Roman minister, of the previous generation, already shown that classical philosophy and humanism could lead a Christian to purity of heart and security of mind. The story of Boethius is too well known<sup>2</sup> to need repeating here, but his celebrated *Philosophiae Consolacionis Libri V* has played too large and original a part in man's struggle against fear and despondency to be ignored<sup>3</sup>. As is well known, the philosopher, in the depths of despair and abasement, while awaiting the executioner in a Pavian dungeon, succeeded so completely in schooling his habit of mind that he ended by realising his misfortunes to be a God-send, and proved that the prosperous man, engaged in the pursuit of wealth, power or pleasure, was really to be pitied. It matters not, as Gibbon observed, that "the sage who could artfully combine, in the same work, the various riches of philosophy, poetry and eloquence, must already have possessed the intrepid calmness, which he affected to seek"<sup>4</sup>; nor that the conclusion of his ingenious and sometimes labyrinthine arguments is the osi-taught virtue of resignation. The book is unique because it demonstrates how much can be accomplished by hard thinking. It makes the intellect the arbiter of experience, the conquering power which can remould circumstances at its will. Have you discarded all desire for earthly power and glory? Then you have subjected the prizes of this world to so close a scrutiny that you have divested them of all adventitious glamour. You have realised that the only real possessions in this world are the things which cannot be taken from you; the things of the mind. Everything else exists only as it is assessed and appraised by thought. But

<sup>1</sup> *De Institutione Divinarum Litterarum. De Artibus et Disciplinis Liberalium Litterarum.*

<sup>2</sup> See Gibbon, chap. xxxix.

<sup>3</sup> By far the best appreciation of Boethius is to be found in *The Dark Ages* (chap. iii), by W. P. Ker, who quotes other authorities.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

how is this serene indifference and independence to be acquired? By another effort of the intellect; by concentrating one's attention on what is absolutely unworldly and superior to Fortune, that is, on the idea of God. So the man who wishes to be happy should put away all thoughts of worldly prosperity and bring his mind into harmony with this all-pervading and all-vitalising principle. He must catch its mood; he must become as single-minded, as self-sufficient and as independent of perishable things. Thus a man whose mind is thoroughly in touch with these influences, is really lifted above the material world. He has identified himself with the formative and creative energies of life; he is enjoying a kind of spiritual immortality. He is also safe from doubt and perplexity. The one baffling enigma of this period, as we have already seen, was the existence of evil. If God's control of the world is complete, and if God is the principle of goodness, how then can wickedness exist, and not only exist, but bear sway? The philosopher who understands the nature of God can see through the fallacy of this dilemma. The wicked are not really triumphant. They are simply less successful than the good. Both good and bad are seeking happiness but the bad do not know where it is to be found; they do not know that it is merely goodness. So the wicked are the spiritually halt and lame, staggering after the prize which they cannot reach. In that they miss goodness, they miss happiness, and in that measure they are punished. Thus, for those who can see, the divine principle is everywhere predominant. Whether or no its power be recognised, it rules all our lives<sup>1</sup>; even what we call chance, is only our failure to perceive its effects<sup>2</sup>. And yet however profoundly the philosopher believes in this omnipresence and omnipotence, he does not therefore feel himself to be so completely absorbed, that he loses initiative and the consciousness of his own personality. Again it is the intellect which works his salvation. He does not only surrender himself to God; he also, in a certain sense, understands the Deity. He rightly perceives that Providence, Fate and Foreknowledge are attributes of the Divine Spirit, but he also knows that they work on a higher plane than does

<sup>1</sup> *Consol.* iv, cap. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* v.

human intelligence. All events are foreseen and foreordained, but as it were from above, without controlling the thoughts and intentions of the participants. Thus God remains the supreme disposer of destinies, yet his subjects are not therefore deprived of free will and of independent judgment.

These counsels and consolations are unfolded to Boethius with every art of rhetoric and literary form by the stately, ardent figure of Philosophy. The whole discourse, with its introductory fragments of dialogue and flights of poetry, is staged as an allegory. No doubt this symbolism appealed to the medieval mind no less than the logical subtlety of which Boethius was a master. But neither of these characteristics accounts for the full popularity of the book. Its universal acceptance is due to the fact that Boethius was enabled to bridge two worlds. The ideas which he develops are based on Greek philosophy; the influence of the Stoics and of the earlier Platonists is particularly noticeable. In fact there is nothing exclusively Christian in his theories. But Boethius himself was undoubtedly a Christian, and to the imaginative and ill-informed historical notions of the Middle Ages his sudden fall invested him with the character of a victim, almost of a martyr. Just as people liked to imagine Belisarius<sup>1</sup> as a blind beggar holding out his hand for bread, so Boethius became a type specially appointed to illustrate the instability of happiness and power. Any teaching or message which he might leave behind would be doubly precious because of his tragic and edifying fate. Thus the most rigid of theologians were entitled to absorb the serene steadfastness, the consciousness of intellectual power, the satisfying sense of reality which we associate with classical civilisation.

So many humanists and theologians of the Middle Ages have studied and written about Boethius that it is not difficult to discover the kind of influence which he exercised. King Alfred, Hincmar, Asser, Otho III, John of Salisbury, Eccard, Jean de Meung, Dante, Chaucer, Gower, Gerson, Sir Thomas More, Domenighi, and Leibnitz, are among his translators, commentators, imitators and admirers. He was regarded as some-

<sup>1</sup> *Decline and Fall*, chap. xliii.

thing more than a source of theological opinions, or even as a reasoned "defense against despair." Laymen seem to value him as much as clerics and in both cases he appears more as a stimulant to thought than as a weapon in controversy. That is why Boethius has exercised a far greater influence than *Historia Universalis* which St Augustin enjoined Orosius to compile as the sequel and complement of *Civitas Dei*. Orosius searches history and lore to prove that mankind has always been miserable, but that he has been infinitely less so since the triumph of Christianity. The book enjoyed a great reputation throughout the Middle Ages because it traced the handiwork of Providence, and collected innumerable stories and myths. But at the same time Orosius was not capable of combating the sense of universal misery, the fruit of wickedness. He is guilty of innumerable exaggerations and perversions. So his *Historia* remains a book of reference, whereas Boethius has roused and stimulated the intellects of countless generations.

At the same time *The Consolations* was nothing more than a beginning, an impulse. Whether or no the philosophy of Boethius was sufficient for the ancient world, it was not enough for the Middle Ages. As we have seen, under the acute consciousness of present and past misery, men had turned only too readily to a few obscure texts and had thence persuaded themselves, through a sequence of generations, that their whole race was vitiated from its origin. As the inherited curse of Adam became more and more in the thoughts of men an imminent reality, so the purpose and tendency of their civilisation had changed. They had to create a new ideal with which to confront this spectre arising out of the Dark Ages. *The Consolations* did no more than demonstrate the means by which this triumph could be consummated. We have now to consider the triumph itself<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> For bibliography, see *ante*, chap. ix, § 3, note, and add P. Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality from the Time of Our Lord till the Dawn of the Middle Ages* (transl. W. H. Mitchell, S. P. Jacques); C. Butler, *Western Mysticism*; A. S. Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of Immortality*.

II. *In the first eleven centuries of the Christian era men learnt not to despair of mankind because of sin. How to repent. How to regain the favour of God. The meaning and efficacy of confession. The difference between carnal and spiritual death. The part played by man's intellect in his own salvation.*

To begin with, they clung to the old epic idea that man was, or had once been, divine. A human being was created by God and in that sense was a part of God, and from the first he had immense capacity for good. In fact, like everything which proceeded from God, they held that he was immortal, and if this body seemed to fall off and decay, such material change was nothing more than the shedding of a vesture, which was destined to reclothe the soul with greater beauty on the Last Judgment Day<sup>1</sup>.

This, in itself, was no ignoble conception of man, yet out of his fall and abasement they constructed a yet more ambitious dream. There was something about man even more god-like than immortality. St Augustin's saying was often quoted, "I would noghte hafe þe stede of ane angelle, if I myghte hafe þe stede þat es purvayede to man."<sup>2</sup> God was a spirit, controlling and animating the universe, and in the same fashion the soul, a part of God, was an influence or agent, dominating the microcosm, the body. As such, it enjoyed in a limited measure, the same independence of judgment and freedom of will as the Mover of the universe. Nor was man's sin of the lowest order. The tasting of the forbidden fruit was not due to gluttony as the York *Corpus Christi Play* suggests<sup>3</sup>; nor was there anything in itself impious in the desire for complete knowledge. In the primitive stages of civilisation there existed a legend that a certain kind of knowledge was dangerous in itself. Such was the Egyptian book of Thoth which killed its possessor, and such also, we may imagine, was the Tree of Forbidden Knowledge in the early Semitic Saga. If this belief was still held in the Middle Ages, it had been attached to the taboo surrounding the black art. Knowledge in itself

<sup>1</sup> Dante, *Para.* xiv, 40; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, pt i, qu. xc, art. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Transl. in fourteenth century in *Speculum S. Edmundi*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Jugement Day*, l. 22.

was good; and would have been granted in God's own good time, probably when man, ascending the ladder of creation, was about to merge his nature into that of the angels. His crime was one of presumption and of disobedience<sup>1</sup>. Just as Lucifer, *il primo superbo*, though fairest of all angels, sinned by seeking increased Grace before the appointed time, so man had desired knowledge *super mensuram*<sup>2</sup>. It was to expiate this vice that Christ's life on earth was especially marked by humility, and it was for this reason that pride was one of the seven deadly sins—*depopulatrix omnium virtutum*<sup>3</sup>. Bishop Poore explained that Satan had transgressed partly because he realised his own beauty and so “fell into pride and of an angel became a foul fiend,” and for that reason the body was bound to the soul, lest the latter should soar as did the spirit of Lucifer. When the seven British theologians from Bancornaburg inquired of the anchorite whether they should abandon their own traditions at the bidding of St Augustin, the ascetic replied, “Yes, if he is lowly and humble of heart”<sup>4</sup>. Even Chaucer's knight was “as meke as is a mayde.” When Hugues de Tibériade explained to Saladin the meaning of the symbolic investiture of knighthood, he concluded

*si n'enkerret pas en orguel,  
Car orguens ne doit pas régner  
En chevalier, ni demorer;  
A simpleche doit toujours tendre*<sup>5</sup>.

Thus though vitiated, contaminated and perverted, human nature could still be imagined as something not ignoble. But if the ingenuity and resourcefulness of humanists and speculators had gone no further, the Middle Ages would have been left with nothing but the contemplation of their ruined grandeur and lost divinity. Such pessimism and self-contempt would have paralysed all action and dried up all inspiration. It is one of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. St Augustin, *Civ. Dei*, xiv, 12, 14 and J. Cassian, *De Coenobiorum Institutis*, xii, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Dante, *Para.* xix, 46 ff.; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, 1<sup>ae</sup> Ptis, qu. clxiii, arts. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> *De Coen. Inst.* xii, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Bede, *Hist. Eccl.* ii, 2.

<sup>5</sup> “So do not seek pride, for pride ought not to reign in a knight, nor live in him. He should ever tend towards humility”—*Ordene de la Chevalerie*, by Hugues de Tabani or de Tibériade.

the really inspiring facts of literary history, that throughout this critical period mankind did not fall a prey to such desolating thoughts. They found a way to expunge or nullify the Original Sin, in which they did not cease to believe, and thus to restore mankind to a state of god-like glory even more noble because won after such efforts. The fall of man had been due to the presumptuous misuse of his greatest and most god-like gift, the faculty of reason, and this act of wilful disobedience had estranged a benevolent God. So human beings had lost contact with what was god-like and were left with the dangerous power of free will now perverted and debased, no longer guided by the influence of divine Grace. The Middle Ages employed this same gift of reason to save themselves. They thought out a way not only of propitiating this offended Deity but, epic-like, of winning Him to their side as an active and therefore irresistible ally. With His almighty aid, the state of god-like glory and power was once more within reach of the human race.

The reader will at once recognise that the initial step towards this recovery was the acceptance and explanation of the doctrine of Redemption. Whether or no the crucifixion first appealed to the imagination as a symbolic or even literal act of life-transference<sup>1</sup>, its real significance became apparent only when Christ's death was interpreted as an act of divine Justice and Mercy combined. Whether the convert followed the Nestorian heresy of the double personality or was an adoptionist and held to the *singularitas personae filii Dei*, he believed that Christ in both body and soul had atoned for Adam's sin. St Anselm had demonstrated by sheer dialectic (*rationibus necessariis*) how much this mystery implied; and it should be noted that he insisted less on the prospect of rescue and alleviation than on the virtue of alliance with God; on the way the human race was thereby dignified, and how dependency on God was in itself an ennoblement<sup>2</sup>. The Abelardians believed that the crucifixion was an act of divine Love to fill mortals with a sense of devotion. Others read their Athanasius and Irenaeus again and went so far as to maintain

<sup>1</sup> *Post. chap. xi, § 2.*

<sup>2</sup> In *Cur Deus Homo, ante*, p. 193.

the doctrine of *recapitulatio*, that humanity was summed up in the superhuman figure of Christ. If any believer was not sufficiently elated by this thought, he had only to remember that Christ had not merely exonerated mankind. By becoming a man and then rising from the dead, he had put this miracle within the reach of all other mortals. A boundless possibility was now opened to human beings, for to conquer Death was to become in some sort divine.

*Veniam quibus ille revenit  
calcata de morte viis,*

exclaimed Prudentius in a well-known passage<sup>1</sup>, ending with *pellite corde metum*. In less imaginative moments, the Christian could also take comfort since St Augustin had showed in opposition to Porphyry<sup>2</sup>, that it was not the fleshly substance in itself but sin that was the evil. Just as Christ had entered the body and mind of man and had then put them off again without guilt, so could each human being when filled with the Holy Spirit.

But the generations which taught and received these doctrines were not so inexperienced in suffering and misfortune as to imagine that the whole race could be deified by one such act. Man was merely saved from the necessity of spiritual death. He was restored to the position in which the means of salvation were within his reach. As we have seen, man laboured under all the inherited tendencies to sin. Each individual redemption had now to be won. Caesarius von Heisterbach tells a delightful story of how God is continually holding his court of judgment, and how Satan once carried up a soul before him, and claimed it on the ground that all mortals were adjudged to death by Adam's sin. Truth and Justice came to the help of the accused, and Truth argued that there are two kinds of death: *mors corporis* and *mors gehennae*. All mortals have to undergo the former, but all mortals incur the risk, not the necessity, of the latter<sup>3</sup>. How was the assistance of a god to be enlisted in

<sup>1</sup> *Apoth.* 1069 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Civ. Dei*, x, 24.

<sup>3</sup> iii, 77; cf. *Piers Plowman* for similar arguments urged between Lucifer, Satan and Goblin when Christ is at the gate, about to harrow Hell. Christ completes the discussion, *Passus xviii*, 270 ff.

evading this mortal danger? Gregory, in his letter to St Augustin, had recognised three stages of falling into sin: *suggestio, delectatio, consensus*<sup>1</sup>. Of these, *consensus* was rightly the climax, for to consent to a sin was to become like it, to be infected with its deadliness. So there were recognised three steps in eradicating sin: *contritio cordis, confessio oris, satisfactio operis*<sup>2</sup>. This process of purification rightly began with contrition, for by revolting against the sin the soul regained its integrity and the evil lost its hold. The next step was to get rid of the poison. To the primitive mind the teeth were literally a barrier or gate (*έρκος δδόντων*). Through them, the thoughts were ever flitting out in words. They created and maintained as it were an open thoroughfare. This idea persisted through the Middle Ages. Bishop Poore, in *Ancren Riwle*, quotes from the *Lives of the Fathers* telling how a "holy man," when some one was praised for eloquence, objected that the dwelling had no gate, that the mouth was always prating and that whoever would might go in and lead forth their ass, that is, their unwise soul, and the bishop comments on how the heart flits away with the flitting word. This contingency involved the need of constant vigilance, but brought with it one great consolation. An evil thought or propensity could be given shape in words and expelled by confession. The process was sometimes likened to leechcraft and wort-cunning and termed *medecina confessionis*<sup>3</sup>.

If the reader could question any serious and intelligent contemporary of St Anselm or of St Bernard about *satisfactio operis*, he would receive an answer which seemed largely irrelevant, because the twelfth-century idea of human worth was so different from ours. He would be told that for the present we were existing in a troubled and unsubstantial dream from which we expected shortly to awake into an intenser and more durable life. The speaker would perhaps unconsciously have recaptured the belief which was propounded in *Somnium Scipionis*: *ii vivunt qui ex corporum vinculis*

<sup>1</sup> *I.e.* the Devil proposes it, the flesh takes pleasure in it, and the spirit consents to it. Recorded by Bede, *Hist. Eccl.* 1, 27.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, pt III, qu. xc, art. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Caesarius von Heisterbach, 1, 23.

*tanquam e carcere evolaverunt; vestra vero, quae dicitur vita, mors est*<sup>1</sup>. On the one hand he was profoundly impressed with the hazards and dangers of his position; his inborn liability to sin, his inherited taint, his lapses of judgment, his difficulty in appreciating the reality of things. Above all he dreaded not annihilation but spiritual death—the extinction of that one spark of holiness and purity, the loss of which would leave his mental faculties immortal, but quench all capacity for joy or beatitude. The body died when the soul left it, the soul died when God left it<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand he had solved the problem of mortality. He would indeed after a few years be required, at any rate for a time, to relinquish his loves and friendships and the few paltry projects and ambitions which he had entertained. Thomas Cantimpratanus<sup>3</sup> compared the body to the halter which constrains the horse. But he had the chance of pursuing through all eternity the only prize worthy a man's efforts, the achievement of divine perfection. He was to prepare to enter, with sharpened and unhampered faculties, into a new life—a second existence boundless in duration and incredibly rich in possibilities of contact with God. Whether he attained to this consummation depended on *satisfactio operis*, on so expiating his sins and altering his course of life that the Holy Spirit would enter his soul. He was supported by the thought that both in this world and in the next there were divine powers which might minister to his progress, and that his own greatness and nobility consisted in the way in which he seconded their influence.

Johannes Scotus, or Scotus Erigena<sup>4</sup>, had made a brilliant attempt to show how man could contribute towards forming an alliance with God by the exercise of the intellect. St Augustin and the gnostics had endeavoured to understand God through symbols. In fact the Church so interpreted the ark in the *Old Testament* and the sacraments in the *New Testament*. Johannes attempted to grasp these truths stripped of their allegories. He believed in the advent of a third epoch when

<sup>1</sup> *iii*, 5. See also *Ps. cxlv*, 4; *Greg. Hist. Frank.* *x*, 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Civ. Dei*, *xiii*, 2. St Augustin recognises three kinds of death.

<sup>3</sup> *Bonum Universale de Apibus*, *ii*, 56.

<sup>4</sup> *Sandys, Hist. of Schol.* bk *vi*, chap. *xxv*, p. 491, n. 2.

we should come into direct contact with God. Nay, more, he believed that even now by force of contemplation we can enter this spiritual church and enjoy (as it were before its time) celestial beatitude<sup>1</sup>. In a sense we can become one with God; the manifestation of divine Thought. In us The Word becomes flesh. But such revelation was not to be won in moments of ecstasy. Scotus was one of the first to trust to the human intellect. He seems to have known Greek, to have studied Gregory of Nyssa, and blended neo-Platonism with Christianity, and he insisted *ratio immutabilis nullius auctoritatis ad stipulatione roborige indiget*<sup>2</sup>. A long succession of religious humanists kept alive this reliance on reason. Aelfric compared each man's spirit to the Trinity, in having memory, understanding and will. These three constitute his soul, and all are employed in exercising the intellect. With the first we review what we have seen and heard, with the second we comprehend all that we see and hear, and from the will come thoughts, words and works. When (in the modern phrase) we train the intellect we are fashioning the image of God within us<sup>3</sup>. The Scottish Council in the seventh century which elected Aidan to be sent as bishop and missionary to King Oswald, talked about *Gratia discretionis, quae virtutum mater est*<sup>4</sup>.

It is difficult for us to realise how necessary these qualities were to the man who sought communion with God. The saying of *Ecclesiastes*, *prior omnium creata est sapiencia*<sup>5</sup>, had immense influence. The medieval mind imagined itself to be so nicely divided among different faculties and propensities that unity of effort was considered to be impossible without some guiding power. Moralists agreed that no man's spiritual life could be safe for a moment unless the intellect was trained to mount guard over the senses. St Bernard was quoted as saying that virtue consisted in the union of will and reason<sup>6</sup>. Thomas Aquinas even declared *Aliae virtutes morales non possunt esse sine*

<sup>1</sup> Gebhart, *It. Myst.* II, § 2; H. Bett, *Johannes Scotus Erigena*; Scotus's chief works: *De Divisione Naturae*, *Liber de Praedestinatione*.

<sup>2</sup> *De Div. Nat.* I, 69, p. 513 B; Sandys, *Hist. Schol.* bk vi, chap. xxv.

<sup>3</sup> *Hom.* I, 284-8.

<sup>4</sup> Bede, *Hist. Eccl.* III, 5.

<sup>5</sup> I, 4.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. *Ayenbite of Inwyt*, "þe uerste stape of riztuolness," fol. 47 c.

*prudentia*<sup>1</sup>. Besides, the intellect was not only required to detect what is fallacious and misleading in the attractions of this world. The just man had to learn how to distinguish true doctrine from the data which gave a specious but deluding idea of the Deity. No wonder that the classical finesse and logic of Boethius was so much admired and that the schoolmen eventually developed a subtlety of intellect and a love of discrimination of which we now cannot always see the justification. As St Anselm said, *saepe contingit in colloquendo de aliqua quaestione, ut Deus aperiat, quod prius latebat*<sup>2</sup>. How could men teach themselves to love God and to prepare for the gift of Grace, if their minds were entertaining a false idea of the source of blessedness? Well might the early ideal of tolerance, as first imposed by the Edict of Milan, be discarded and St Augustin condemn *falsas perniciosasque doctrinas, quae animas Hispanorum multo infelicius quam corpora barbaricus gladius, trucidarunt*<sup>3</sup>.

The intellectualism of the eleventh and twelfth centuries reached its climax in Abelard. He argued that ideas are not entities but mere concepts, and that therefore the reason was the final criterion of Truth<sup>4</sup>. So all traditions, revelations and dogmas should be scanned and criticised. Owing to this attitude, he is generally regarded as the chief opponent to the idealism of Johannes Scotus<sup>5</sup>. Yet in one sense he continued the teaching of the Irishman. He showed how much could be done towards the perfecting of man, by hard thinking and subtle self-examination. As he himself said *cum profectu intelligentiae caritatis accenditur flamma*<sup>6</sup>. Abelard died in 1142, at a time when Europe had almost succeeded in reconciling the ideal of the warrior to that of the saint, and one might be tempted to conclude that man was now as much master of his fate at the University of Paris as on the battlefields of Palestine. We have given many reasons to explain why this triumph of culture vanished almost before its consummation, and there is one more cause, inherent in Abelard's own teaching. He went too far. He traced sin back to the thought, the intention,

<sup>1</sup> *Summa, 1<sup>ae</sup>, 2<sup>ae</sup>, qu. LXV, art. 2.*

<sup>2</sup> *Cur Deus Homo, pt I, cap. II.*

<sup>3</sup> *De Ratione Animae.*

<sup>4</sup> *Dial. int. Philos. jud. et christian. (ed. Cousin), II, 646.*

<sup>5</sup> *Gebhart, It. Myst. I, § 6.*

<sup>6</sup> *Theol. Christ. 456; Gebhart, ibid.*

as if there was no inherited taint, nor even a sinful act which could be measured and judged. He did not so much overcome the enemy as persuade you of his non-existence. But all the time mortals were conscious of his presence, and yearned for the triumphal sense of conquering him. So, like Boethius, he was eagerly read, and stimulated many minds to activity, but could not inspire a great idea or fire the imagination.

III. *The study of Aristotle and the rise of the scientific spirit under Frederick II gave a new impetus, by opposition, to the contemplative study of God and the cult of divine wisdom. Nor did this ideal degenerate into mere ecstasy and emotionalism, except in certain cases. The medieval idea of the Devil shows how great were the demands which the religious enthusiast made on his own intellect. Yet the limitations of human knowledge were not forgotten. The Contemplative was preferred to the Active life. Seclusion and concentration were necessary before a mortal could learn really to love God, or to acquire Charity, Hope and Faith. The Christian Hero summarised.*

So far we have considered the devotional and intellectual effort by which man reconquered hope. He had convinced himself that almost ineffable grandeur lay just within his reach. Let us now consider what ways and means he had planned to accomplish his salvation, and to regain his god-like state. Here we meet with a marked conflict of beliefs. All agreed that what men needed most to recover was Grace; and again all agreed that this influence was not to be won like an earthly prize. But some theologians, as we have seen, went so far as to insist that the gift was bestowed arbitrarily only on those who were destined to be saved, and that God was for ever turned in anger from the vast majority of mankind<sup>1</sup>. Others believed that the priceless boon could be earned, and all through the Middle Ages both the fatalist school and their more humane brethren agreed that the duty of man was to deserve it. The fathers of the desert had feared that the body by its sinfulness would corrupt the spirit: the devout of the later Middle Ages feared that the Spirit would not enter the body because of its

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Petrus Lombardus, *Sentent. III, 32*; *Malachi i, 2-3*; *Rom. ix, 11-13*.

sinfulness. The nuns in *Ancren Riwle* were taught to fear that the house of their soul was too narrow for the Holy Ghost to enter<sup>1</sup>, and that though Grace cannot be bought, yet those who slackened in their efforts, became unworthy to receive it<sup>2</sup>. Even as late as the seventeenth century it was believed that good spirits "are as ready now, I am persuaded, if wee would meet them half way, as the saints did in old time, by setting their affections on things above. But to come down quite to the earth, where wee by grovelling, were too great an indignitie for them, and would bee too dangerous a confirmation of our error."<sup>3</sup> Grace was the becoming one with God; the identification of our desires with His will, the reabsorption of our own individuality and inclination into the great moving force of goodness. St Augustin pointed the way when he declared *attingere aliquantulum mente Deum magna beatitudo*<sup>4</sup>. Thomas Aquinas was but consummating the same idea when he declared *perfectio hominis est, ut contemptis temporalibus, spiritualibus inhaereat*<sup>5</sup>. Thomas-à-Kempis, in his prayer for Grace, is even more explicit—*Da mihi, Domine, scire quod sciendum est, hoc amare quod amandum est, hoc laudare quod tibi summe placet, hoc reputare quod tibi pretiosum appetet, hoc vituperare quod tibi sordescit*<sup>6</sup>.

One is tempted at first to imagine that such an ideal loses itself in mysticism and ecstasy. Yet in reality the mortal who would follow this course to its goal needed far more than fervour and emotionalism. Besides, the events of the thirteenth century gave a curious impulse to the study and contemplation of the Divine Nature. Frederick II had come to the government of the so-called Holy Roman Empire at a time when European civilisation was receiving an immense impulse from contact with the East, especially from Persian, Turkish and Berber philosophy expressed in Arabic<sup>7</sup>. As Gebhart has explained, he was not content to patronise and encourage learning. He

<sup>1</sup> Pt i.

<sup>2</sup> Pt vi.

<sup>3</sup> *The Story Books of Little Gidding, being the Religious Dialogues recited in the Great Room 1631-2.* From the original manuscript of Nicholas Ferrar, with an Introduction, 1899.

<sup>4</sup> *Serm. xxxviii.*

<sup>5</sup> 1<sup>ae</sup>, 2<sup>ae</sup>, qu. xcix, art. 6.

<sup>6</sup> III, 50-7.

<sup>7</sup> De L. O'Leary, *Arabic Thought and its Place in History*.

gathered round him scholars from all over the world, of the sort to demonstrate how far science and metaphysics could be studied without the help of theology. Averroës even argued that man was free to choose the religion which appealed to his intellect or temperament. Their aim was to find out the scientific explanation of the mysteries which heretofore had been explained by religion. The teaching of Aristotle was their guide; practical experiments and research were their methods<sup>1</sup>. We are at the present time so accustomed to the triumph of science that we do not stop to notice that these pioneers at that time were suffering from the same disability as was Abelard. They were hurrying on to explore, investigate, gauge, dissect, perhaps even to vivisect, before they had overthrown man's greatest enemy—none the less formidable because we now know it to be a figment of the imagination. And at this stage man could realise himself only by finding a way to conquer the consciousness of sin.

So it was well that the universities opposed the secularisation of knowledge and by this policy gave a new direction to the "contemplative life."<sup>2</sup> For instance, scholars had access to Aristotle's *De Generatione Animalium* and *De Anima*, and had learnt from these treatises first how the body was slowly formed in the womb and nourished and secondly how vital energy, arising from some primary source called god, was thence diffused through all living things on this earth. In fact Averroës, who made an abstract of the *De Generatione*, and also a commentary and complete exposition of the *De Anima*<sup>3</sup>, was so impressed by this doctrine that he believed the human soul (the passive intellect) to be really dependent for its life and activity on this universal all-pervading spirit (the active intellect) which touched each human body and filled it with life for the few brief years of its existence on earth. Such an interpretation, though promising an eternal continuance of life, yet held out no hopes of the permanence of personality or of individual consciousness. So the teaching of Averroës

<sup>1</sup> For the whole subject see Gebhart, *op. cit.* iv, § 4; Renan, *Averroës*, II.

<sup>2</sup> *Piers Plowman*, B, vi, 249–51.

<sup>3</sup> Sandys, *Hist. Schol.* bk vi, chap. xxx.

did not suit the humanists of the later Middle Ages. It robbed men of too much greatness and was strenuously opposed by Thomas Aquinas<sup>1</sup> and Dante<sup>2</sup>, who argued that as only God could create, each individual soul and body must both come from God and are therefore indestructible. As we have explained, physical death was merely a temporary separation from this body; the real life of man was in his spirit. As soon as the brain of the unborn child was formed within the womb, God breathed into it a soul<sup>3</sup>, newly created, not pre-existent, which united itself with the animal instincts and mental faculties already developing in the skull of the *foetus*. These mental faculties become so closely associated with the spirit that they cling to it, even after physical death, and become far more powerful when released from the body<sup>4</sup>.

It will be seen from this example that the universities were not so much averse from Aristotle as opposed to the materialistic and rationalist deductions which could be drawn from his work. So, in Gebhart's words, they made of him a "maître du syllogisme, qui laisse les scolastiques ratiociner d'une manière assez innocente sur la matière et la forme, le principe d'individuation, le dernier ciel incorruptible, le premier moteur immobile."<sup>5</sup> They opposed the new scientific movement because it aimed first and foremost at a knowledge of man, whereas in their eyes, the means of investigating physical and physiological phenomena were still hopelessly inadequate, nor was the subject in itself worth the study. Man on his human side was not an inspiring theme. He was worth investigation only where he found contact with God. To justify our existence on earth, to regain the grandeur and immortality originally designed for the human race, to render ourselves worthy of alliance with the Holy Spirit, we must explore and develop that part of us which is akin to the divine. So man's first duty

<sup>1</sup> *Summa*, 1<sup>ae</sup> Ptis, qu. LXXVI, art. 2; qu. LXXIX, art. 5; qu. CXVII, art. 1; qu. CXVIII, art. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Purg.* xxv, 63; *Convit.* iv, 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Para.* vii, 142; *Summa*, 1<sup>ae</sup>, qu. XL, arts. 2, 3.

<sup>4</sup> For the whole question see Renan, *Averroës et l'Averroïsme*; P. Paganini, *L'Averroës della Divina Commedia*; and cf. *ante*, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.* iv, § 4.

was to become as familiar as possible with the idea of God; to catch His spirit as manifested in His saints and theologians; to understand how the divine idea radiated into all created things; to form a right interpretation of Providence, Fortune and Destiny<sup>1</sup>; to perceive the beauty which God, by His presence, sheds upon all that He has created. In fact, as Thomas Aquinas argued in opposition to Scotus, beatitude consisted in understanding or seeing God with the mind's eye more than merely in loving Him<sup>2</sup>.

Such a proviso was eminently necessary, for the besetting danger of all such doctrines was the temptation to self-abandonment in ecstasy and emotionalism. In fact Giovanni dei Gioachini, in the twelfth century, adopting the theories of Johannes Scotus, prophesied that in the near future we should behold the glory of Christ's visage, not through symbol but as it is<sup>3</sup>. Truth and peace would be supreme, and we should be at one with the divine essence. But according to Giovanni this consummation would be attained only through the *misticus intellectus*, by contemplation born of solitude. According to him St Antony and the other eremites were the most perfect Christians that had yet appeared on earth. Thus the visionary has nothing but an ideal of the past for perfecting the future. In 1254 Gerardo di Borgo-san-Donnino attempted to revive this teaching in *Introductorius ad Evangelium aeternum*. Yet the Parisian doctors dealt so effectually with his system, that its tenets are now known only through the contemptuous allusions of these opponents<sup>4</sup>. At times the passion for the contemplative life, founded on the text "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God," drove mortals to the most extravagant excesses. Laurentius Gallus described the contemplative man as already half in heaven. "Betuene ham and paradys ne is bote a lyte woʒ | þet hy ageleþ be þenchinge and be wylnyng, and yet þet bodi is of þis half: þe herte and the gost: is of oþer half." In *þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd* we see to what an extent women's cult of the "heavenly lemmann" (*leofman*) could become an

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Vergil's adieu to Dante, *Purg.* xxvii, 130-141.

<sup>2</sup> *Summa*, 1<sup>ae</sup>, 2<sup>ae</sup>, qu. iii, arts. 1-8; 3<sup>ae</sup>, Suppl. qu. xci, arts. 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> *Concordia*, v, 81.

<sup>4</sup> Gebhart, *op. cit.* vi, § 4.

outlet for suppressed eroticism and maternity. It is also surprising how many continued to seek enlightenment in solitude, pinning their faith on the promise of the Bible made to a "beloved soul," *ducam eam in solitudinem et ibi loquar ad cor ejus*<sup>1</sup>.

But the significance of these extravagances can easily be over-estimated. After all, the desire to draw near to God and to creep into the heart of the world spirit can be traced in all ages which have outgrown the mythological explanations of life. Why else did Julian return to paganism except that he found in neo-Platonism the art of communicating with the eternal powers through dreams, oracles and ecstatic contemplation? In this way he reconciled himself to the mysteries of existence<sup>2</sup>. Besides, too much emphasis is liable to be put on the unreasoning and imaginatively receptive side of the devotee's habit of mind. "L'intuition directe," says Gebhart<sup>3</sup>, "des choses éternelles, la conversation intime avec Dieu; le mysticisme n'a besoin ni de syllogismes, ni d'expérience." Such a statement is obviously true as a generalisation and undeniably applies to certain well-known characters; but only to those who ignore the complexity of life and the certainty of death. There is a story in the *Lives of the Fathers* much appreciated in the Middle Ages<sup>4</sup>, telling how an angel helped a hermit to bury a corpse without betraying the least discomfort at the stench. Just then a lecher rode by, and though he was clothed in clean fresh raiment, the heavenly visitor at once held his nose. Being more than human, he had the penetration to *sense* the rottenness of vice. The devout Christian had found the necessity of cultivating this faculty. In fact a life devoted to God involved a strange blending of activity and receptiveness, accurate research and intuition, practical experience and abstract thought, reason and emotion. The first virtue to be cultivated was certainly an ardent desire to submit oneself to the influence of the Holy Spirit and this *animi extensio in Deum*

<sup>1</sup> *Hos.* ii, 14.

<sup>2</sup> See *Eis τὸν βασιλέα γῆλιον*. Also see A. Naville, *L'Empereur Julien et la philosophie du Polythéisme*; G. Boissier, *Fin du Paganisme*, Livre I, chap. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.* v, § 5.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Caesarius von Heisterbach, II, 54; *Annen Riwle*, IV.

*per amoris desiderium*<sup>1</sup>, must become so passionate that it surpasses all other passions and purges the soul of earthly lusts and desires. But when once possessed by this yearning, the initiate must cultivate the insight of a philosopher, and the subtlety of a logician, to discriminate the true from the false. Even so unworldly a visionary as Richard Rolle could write with amazing penetration and eloquence on the deceptiveness (*falsa felicitas*) of this world<sup>2</sup>. The saying of *Ecclesiastes, prior omnium creata est sapiencia*<sup>3</sup>, had the greatest influence. Bishop Poore explained that every sacrifice should be offered with salt, and that while the former are Christian austerities, the latter is wisdom<sup>4</sup>. The Prologue to the third book of *Theophilus* is perhaps the most complete exposition of all that could be achieved by human skill and knowledge directed to the cultivation of the soul and the study of God<sup>5</sup>.

The trust in wisdom is illustrated by the idea of the Devil. We have seen that in the early days of Christianity, he was one of an innumerable host of spirits who worked evil to man except so far as he was restrained by the virtue and symbols of the true God. Such he still remained in the popular imagination; but among scholars and students he represented the difficulties which even the most enlightened themselves experience in understanding. For instance, Richard Rolle relinquished his university career and spoke contemptuously of those whom he considered to be high in wisdom, but low in the love of God, and puffed up by their involved arguments (*argumentationibus implicitis*)<sup>6</sup>; yet when the fire of divine Love took possession of him, he needed all his intellect and subtlety to certify himself that the influence came from God<sup>7</sup>. For it was one of the special attributes of the Devil to assume the appearance of something good. Caesarius declares expressly, *angelus Sathane, sicut testimonium habemus ex divinis libris, saepe transfigurat se in angelum lucis*<sup>8</sup>, and he recounts a horrible example of the way the fiend, appearing as St James, persuaded a sinner to commit suicide in the hope of pardon, and

<sup>1</sup> Bonaventura.

<sup>2</sup> *Incendium Amoris*, lib. II, cap. viii.

<sup>3</sup> i, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ancren Riwle*, iii.

<sup>5</sup> See excerpts, *Medieval Garner*, p. 168.

<sup>6</sup> *Incend. Am.* lib. II, cap. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid. Prol.*

<sup>8</sup> iii, 9

then carried off his soul to Hell<sup>1</sup>. It was of course well known that the power of the Devil extended only to the flesh, senses and animal instincts of man; but it was always being feared that the mind, the intellect, the higher nature, might be so closely joined to the lower as to prove exposed to his influence. So an Old English homily compares him to a serpent: *invidia tabescit, sine strepitu serpit, quod pungit veneno afficit*<sup>2</sup>. Laurentius Gallus described the souls of men and of angels in their receptivity to be like mirrors. Just as one mirror will receive forms imprinted on another, so the thoughts of men may be filled with thoughts proceeding from the Devil<sup>3</sup>. In fact the peculiar virtue of the Virgin was partly derived from her absolute purity; she was inaccessible to the Devil, being immaculate and so the Hope of the world was hidden securely within her<sup>4</sup>. Well might it be said in the *Speculum S. Edmundi*: “Bot to þe knaweynge of Godde, þat es sothefastnes, ne may þou noghte com Bot be knaweynge of thi selfe; ne git to þe luf of Godde may þou noghte com, bot thurhge þe luf of thynn evyn-crystyn. To þe knaweyng of þi selfe may þou com with besy vmbylhynkyng; And to þe knaweyng of Godde thurhge pure contemplacione.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus the mortal who gained the right view point from which the influence of Heaven might be absorbed, had made some progress towards counteracting the curse of Original Sin. And yet the Middle Ages fully recognised the limitations of human knowledge. Let it be repeated; the most penetrating clearness of vision, the intensest concentration of thought, could bring no comfort or sense of elevation, unless they led the mind to within sight of Grace. So they explained why the Tree of Knowledge was forbidden. Its fruit was of little ultimate benefit to mankind till the compensating light from Heaven had come. For the same reason, the most austere and enlightened heathen were excluded from Paradise. Just as God ordered through Moses that all vessels captured from the enemy should be purified by water and fire, so human

<sup>1</sup> *iii*, 62.

<sup>2</sup> On *Estote fortes in Bello*, E.E.T.S., O.E. Hom., 2nd series.

<sup>3</sup> *Ayenbite*, “þe xiuste stape of riȝtuolnesse,” fol. 49A.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* “þe ȝeue boȝes of chasteté.” <sup>5</sup> *xiv*, transl. E.E.T.S., 26.

beings, even when rescued from the Devil, had to be purified by Christian influences—*aqua baptismatis et igne martyrii purificandi*<sup>1</sup>. Besides, if mortals had a *right* to Heaven, it would mean that the divine power was limited, and such a mis-understanding must of itself imply complete ignorance of God's nature. So the heathen may also have been excluded, like the angel whom St Brandan saw, not because they assented to evil, "Bote soulement forto schewe: ourer louerdes suete miȝt."<sup>2</sup> What was the essential difference between the greatest of heathen philosophers and poets and such theologians as Augustin, Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory, Anselm and Thomas? It was that the Fathers of the Christian Church, in addition to their vast erudition, had learnt to see God and His works as they really are. If this revelation could be achieved, the human being was so filled with wonderment, gratitude, benignity and love that his rehabilitation was complete. Such was the superiority which the saints achieved by the gift of Grace. They attempted to describe their triumph in such terms as *carnis claustra contemplatione transire*, or *doctrina quae desursum ex divina influentia manat*, or *claritatem Dei sine vicissitudinis umbra contemplari*. In *Ancren Riwle* an anchoress who "meditates enraptured" is compared to a bird that flies aloft and sits on the green boughs singing and if it descends to earth for food, is always on the watch and never safe<sup>3</sup>. Rolle spoke of the way the hermit rose to contemplation as if in the strains of an organ, *et quasi in organo ascendit in altum concupitum clarificantem contemplari*<sup>4</sup>, and compared contemplation to the song of God's love absorbed into the mind with the sweet ... f. ... l. ... praise<sup>5</sup>. The expression of the psalmist, *panem angelorum manducavit homo*, was sometimes taken to signify this initiation into the Truth.

The wise and learned might recognise that Grace could come only by revelation and intuition, but nevertheless they concentrated their thoughts not only on God but on His relations to this world, and trusted that one day the true significance of the Deity would burst upon them. The two qualities most earnestly sought for were *simplicitas* and *puritas*:

<sup>1</sup> R. Glaber, *Historiarum Libri Quinque*, lib. v, cap. i. <sup>2</sup> *St Brandan*, l. 202.  
<sup>3</sup> Pt iii. <sup>4</sup> *Incend. Am.* lib. rv. <sup>5</sup> *De Emend. Vit.* xii.

the freedom from any other passion or pursuit, which enables a man to give himself up entirely to the contemplation of God, and that state of holiness which enables him to recognise God everywhere. That is why some of the most enlightened moralists believed that meditation and introspection might well engross all a man's energies more profitably than even a career of active self-denial. The contrast between the active and the contemplative lives was like the contrast between Martha and Mary. Good works were like the field of battle in which the knight first wins fame; the mere beginning of the saint's career; the sticks which make the coal to burn. But the power of understanding God, and those spiritual matters pertaining to the soul—in a word the gift of light—comes only as the fruit of contemplation.

Whatever the means of reaching the goal, the goal was always the same. As we have seen, it consisted in the wisdom to love God; and so near akin was this divine insight to profane erudition that Laurentius finds it advisable to define the difference. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the wisdom whereby a man is possessed by love for God ("huerby he is ynome of þe loue of God"). Wisdom in any case is tasting or relishing knowledge ("knaulechinge smackinde"). So while the mere erudite, who knows God only through the Scriptures or by the study of nature or by force of reasoning, is like a man studying an object in a mirror, the real devout feels or tastes the divine essence ("yuele God | an to y-knawe ase be ȝuelz")<sup>1</sup>. So Grace made itself felt in the soul as *charitas*. In the language of Lumbardus it was *Dilectio, qua diligitur Deus propter se, et proximum propter Deum, vel in Deo*<sup>2</sup>. This was the perfect happiness and sense of blessedness which annihilated fear or despondency and transcended every other emotion. *Perfecta Beatitudo hominis in visione divinae essentiae consistit*<sup>3</sup>, said Thomas. Dante described God as *illud fulgentissimum speculum in quo cuncti (angeli) repreäsentantur pulcherrimi*<sup>4</sup>, and again and again alludes to him as such in *Divina Commedia*<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps à-Kempis

<sup>1</sup> *Ayenbite*, "Of þe yefþe of Wysdome," fols. 76<sup>b</sup>, 77<sup>a</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> *Sent.* III, 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Pt* I, 2<sup>ae</sup>, qu. v, art. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *De Vulg. El.* I, 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Purg.* XXX, 103; *Para.* IX, 74; XI, 21; XV, 61; XVIII, 16; XIX, 30; XXV, 53.

has described this union with the greatest force and conviction: *quanto magis aliquis unitus et interius implicatus fuerit, tanto plura et altiora sine labore intelligit quia desuper lumen intelligentiae accipit*<sup>1</sup>.

Such was the real hero of the later Middle Ages. Even at the beginning of his high endeavour, while still unformed and unproved, he was no contemptible creature, since both his reason and his soul came from God and were, like their Maker, immortal. The first step in his progress needed intelligence and clear thinking, for he had to detect the strain of sinfulness which must necessarily run through all his thoughts and actions. He must next discern how much of what seemed good in this world and worthy of pursuit was really a delusion, often so subtly concealed that only the keenest wits could penetrate the veneer. Then, when he had succeeded in understanding his own nature with all its perversions, he again needed his reason to select or invent the means of self-reform, and the utmost exercise of will to persist in this course. Many ways of accomplishing his purgation might suggest themselves to him, some perhaps calling forth all his activity of brain, or testing his extremest courage and endurance. In the end, he hoped to be so freed from earthly distractions and weaknesses that he could become equal to embracing the ineffable goodness of God. Thus, while still on earth, he became a being of a different order; though mortal, he had begun his second immortal existence; he was already filled with spiritual love and convinced that his beatitude would rest with him for ever.

#### iv. *The culture of the Middle Ages as illustrated by the social status of women and by mariolatry.*

Perhaps the true greatness of the later Middle Ages can best be illustrated by the history of the social status of women. As Amiel has said in *Fragments d'un Journal Intime*: "Ce sont les femmes qui, semblables à la flore des montagnes, marquent avec la précision la plus caractéristique la gradation des zones superposées de la Société." As far as can be gathered from the incomplete evidence of northern paganism, women seem to

<sup>1</sup> 1, 3, 3.

have been regarded as more intelligent, and possibly as more god-like than men. It is particularly noticeable that their sex was usually held to be intermediaries between mortals and deities. They seem from earliest times to have enjoyed a double reputation for wisdom, partly as shown in leechcraft and the growing of corn, and partly (as a result) for witchcraft and the use of spells. Thus Gróa, the wife of Aurvandill, was able to beguile the broken bone out of Thor's head<sup>1</sup>. Whatever disabilities they suffered, arose from their comparative defencelessness in times of warfare. The conversion of Europe did little to save them from servitude or ill-usage in secular life, but opened new opportunities for their intellectual gifts. A prejudice against their deceptiveness and malignancy had existed at least since the days of Hesiod<sup>2</sup>; St Paul and St Peter<sup>3</sup> spoke of their frivolity and weakness, and Epiktetos<sup>4</sup> seems to have regarded the whole female sex as bad. On the other hand, though St Jerome complained of the variability which rendered them the sport of every vain wind of doctrine<sup>5</sup>, yet this pretended misogynist was ready to discuss abstruse theological problems with them, and Paulinus shared his spirituality with Therasia his wife<sup>6</sup>. No one who has read Gregory of Tours will forget the fascinating story how Scolastica converted Injuriosus on their wedding night<sup>7</sup>. In fact women were still the intermediaries between mortals and the higher powers; they had now become missionaries and teachers; and thanks to this proselytising ability they still partially freed themselves from the dominion of men. In the eighth and ninth centuries it became particularly fashionable for ladies of high birth to take the veil. At one time they were considered to be the equals of men and lived in the same religious house, engaged in weaving and in study. The Benedictine monastery of Gandersheim, founded in 852 by Ludolf, duke of Saxony, of which his wife Oda was the first abbess, is a celebrated example and was destined in the tenth century to produce Hrotsvitha<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Skáldsk.* xvii.

<sup>2</sup> *Theog.* 590 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *E.g. I Tim.* ii, 9-15; v, 6; *I Pet.* iii, 1 ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Ep.* cxxxiii.

<sup>4</sup> *Disc.* i, 16, 18; iii, 12; *Man.* xl.

<sup>7</sup> *Hist. Frank.* i, 42.

<sup>6</sup> Boissier, *Fin du Paganisme*, iv, § 2.

<sup>8</sup> See Chas. Magnin, *Théâtre de Hrotsvitha*, 1845.

With the coming of feudalism the position of the lay-woman was immensely improved. Norman kings even granted the right of succession to earldoms and baronetcies irrespective of sex, so that if male issue failed, the woman could transfer the title into another family by marriage. At about the same time their religious status sank. Remembering such Anglo-Saxons as St Etheldreda, Eadburga and Lioba, it is significant that medieval England can boast of no such learned women, except the anchoress Julian of Norwich<sup>1</sup>. During the twelfth century the Church tightened its control over marriage and divorce. By the mid-thirteenth the clergy had ceased to marry, and the harangues and invectives against women, which arose in early monastic misogyny, had increased enormously in volume and in bitterness and had even found an echo in popular satires and tirades<sup>2</sup>. This aversion was yet another consequence of the insistence on Original Sin. As the curse laid on Adam was transmitted at birth to all his descendants, it was inevitable that some stain should cling to the processes of begetting and parturition. Augustin had decided that all sexual attraction was concupiscence<sup>3</sup>; and when the second Augustin was appointed bishop to convert England, among the questions addressed to Gregory is *interrogatio VIII si praegnans mulier debeat baptizari? aut postquam genuerit, post quantum tempus possit ecclesiam intrare?* Even the more humane doctors and theologians of the later Middle Ages had been convinced that the only pure and elevating love was that which the worshipper absorbed from communion with God and so extended to all His creatures. Passion for a woman could not but dull that holy fire. We have seen what noble types of womanhood appear to have existed in the days of Froissart<sup>4</sup>, and yet in many of the earlier romances, though their position is recognised, they seem to be labouring under a certain stigma. Either it is the knight who fights, wins and protects, while the woman falls in love, courts and becomes the reward, or else she becomes the warrior's evil genius as did Lubie in *Girart de Viane* and

<sup>1</sup> E. Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. III, chap. 5.

<sup>3</sup> See Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ante*, chap. VIII, § 1.

Lubias in *Amis et Amile*, and both Kriemhild and Brynhild in the *Nibelungenlied*<sup>1</sup>. With the return of Celtic romanticism women are again regarded as experts in magic and leech-craft<sup>2</sup>.

It was part of the problem of the later Middle Ages to combat this half contemptuous, half distrustful attitude. They had the best of all authority: the example of Jesus himself who had certainly regarded male and female as equal<sup>3</sup>. We do not, of course, suggest that any council or conclave sat with such an end in view, but merely that civilisation of its own accord drew men, as if instinctively, to counteract a tendency harmful to themselves. Perhaps, as Renan suggests<sup>4</sup>, we ought primarily to thank the Bretons or Welsh who gave us Guinevere, Iseult and Enid from Arthur's court. But that is not all. Towards the end of the twelfth century Pierre Vidal, Cadenet, Raimond de Vaqueiras, and Bernard de Ventadour visited north Italy and spread there a new idea of love, claiming that the sentiment has in it something mystic and exalted, that the lover is one to whom superhuman beauty and charm have been revealed. This almost religious enthusiasm, which they termed *joy*, was welcomed like the promise of new life, but once again it was the men of intellect who realised its full significance. They recollected that Plato (as they understood him) had proved love to be the yearning towards the divine; the affinity which draws man and God together; the blending of the Immortal with the Mortal; the one influence common to the celestial and terrestrial. This doctrine saved them from the contempt or even horror of love. It was now realised that passion for a woman was no mere carnal attraction, but an emanation from God Himself. It was a divine effluence, conveyed by a human personality, who thus herself became pure and sanctified.

This theory rescued one of the most precious sources of inspiration for the human race and the reader will at once think of the sonnets of Guido Guinicelli or the *Vita Nuova*. But though the movement depended largely on the interpretation

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. vii, § 2, and T. Wright, *History of Domestic Manners*, chaps. iii, xi, xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, chap. vii, § 2.

<sup>3</sup> T. R. Glover, *Conflict of Religions*.

<sup>4</sup> *Poésie de la Race Celtique*.

of Plato and on the teaching of the Franciscans<sup>1</sup>, it was made possible by an earlier and yet bolder effort of imaginative adoration: the so-called mariolatry. This worship, which raised a mortal to the skies and rendered possible any dream of human greatness, is one of the most wonderful achievements of the human race. In a sense it was the resumption of an earlier effort. The Gospels had said enough to establish the idea of Mary's divinity, but nothing more. Then the *Apocryphal Gospels* sprang up during the first two centuries of the Christian era and created the worship of the Virgin<sup>2</sup>. While still a young girl she devotes herself to prayer till the third hour; then employs herself in manual labour till the ninth; from the ninth she continues to pray, till an angel brings her her food. She is perfect in chastity, humility, charity, diligence and knowledge of the word of God and she is attended by angels. Such ideas were almost inevitable when we remember the early Christian belief that the Holy Spirit actually entered the mind of the devout and took possession of their thoughts, and as the author of *Christ*<sup>3</sup> has shown, this visitation had been granted in greater fullness to Mary than to any other mortal. Thus, although the Church was so unwilling to give a definite judgment on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, and although some Dominicans never accepted the belief, yet mariolatry becomes a feature of the later Middle Ages. The *Dormi Secure* argues eloquently for the cult<sup>4</sup>. A twelfth-century sermon describes how the greatness and brilliance of God was enclosed in the Virgin's womb and yet made itself felt, even as the light passes deepened and enriched through a church window "and the sunne schineð per þurh. and ho nimeð al swinck hou also ho þer on uint. zif þet gles is red. ho schineð red. Also þe liuendes godes sune in to þe meidene

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. viii, § 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, Post Const. Tischendorf, ed. Lipsius e Bonnet, 1898, transl. Alex. Walker, Ante-Nicene Christian Library. For the whole subject see G. Boissier, *Fin du Paganisme*, iv, § 1 and Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, *One Hundred and Ten Miracles of Lady Mary*, transl. from *Ethiopic MSS.* (mostly collected from France before the twelfth century and circulated in the East); A. F. Findlay, *Byways in Early Christian Literature*.

<sup>3</sup> ll. 199-207.

<sup>4</sup> Coulton, *op. cit.* no. 305.

com. and ho of hire meiden-had nawhit ne wende.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps St Bernard’s prayer<sup>2</sup> expresses the peculiar quality of veneration better than any other human utterance, even than Peire de Corbiac’s celebrated *Donna, rosa ses espina*, or Constance’s<sup>3</sup> appeal to “Thow glorie of wommanhede, thow faire May,” who saw her own son’s body torn on the cross, and so could pity all who suffer. St Bernard, and Dante, the even more illustrious imitator<sup>4</sup> of his Advent sermon, worshipped the Virgin because she possessed goodness and holiness in such a stupendous degree and was so abundantly filled with heavenly Grace that she commanded the divine affection and reverence of Christ himself. God is the love of all that is pure and blessed and sublime, and the Virgin embodies these qualities so completely, though in human form, that the divine affluence rests on her fully satisfied. She typifies the absolute perfection of the human race, and this excellence is bound up with other peculiarly feminine virtues. Not only did the divine spirit germinate within her; it was her province to bring out, nurture and educate whatever was weak and unformed. She was particularly the friend of sinners, such as soldiers, who, though dead to all other religious appeals, nevertheless paid court to her<sup>5</sup>, perhaps in response to the promptings of chivalry. At other times she helped the foolish and impotent. It was a common belief that early on every Christmas-day she descended into Purgatory and rescued the souls of those who still kept their faith in her, *quia illa nocte illum regem gloriae Christum de eius utero in hunc mundum eduxit*<sup>6</sup>. Thus besides motherhood, she exercised particularly the duties of sympathetic admonitrix.

Thus the Virgin became the symbol and idealisation of the great emotional and intellectual movement which has been traced in this chapter. What men had learnt to revere in the

<sup>1</sup> “The sun shines through it and receives whatever colour comes to it. If the glass is red, it shines red. So the living God came into the Maiden and she lost none of her maidenhead.”

<sup>2</sup> *Serm. in Advent*, II, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Manne of Lawes Tale*, 841–54.

<sup>4</sup> *Paradiso*, xxxiii, 1 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Caesarius von Heisterbach, *all Liber III*; cf. the well-known *fabliaux* and *miracle-books*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* cap. 25.

Holy Mother of Jesus, they came to expect in a lesser degree from other women, till every lady became, at least to a poet's fancy, a mundane reflection of the Virgin. Yet, as we have shown, no tale of chivalry developed into a manifesto of the conquest of Original Sin. It has already been suggested that any poet who attempted such a theme would find himself lost among the insignia of feudalism which were no longer truly heroic. We have now to ask whether the search for Truth and Sinlessness could find expression elsewhere in a tale of action and daring.

## CHAPTER XI

### MAN, WHILE STILL ALIVE, SEEKS WISDOM AND RIGHTEOUSNESS IN THE NEXT WORLD

**I**N the last chapter we saw how the life of the intellect and the life of the spirit could be combined into one sublime ideal, but it is not so easy to recognise the possibility of epic poetry which lay therein. So it must be remembered that in the case of earlier heroic ages, the quality of their inspiration came from the thought of difficulties overcome. Often their antagonists were so formidable and the rewards of victory so ample that the conquerors were felt to be a race superior to the rest of mankind. The core and spirit of the hero's triumph was in some sort the conquest of fear. The spiritual and intellectual ideal which we have just been discussing was of a similar kind. Men were conceived to be capable of such greatness because they were faced with a crisis worthy of the most heroic efforts. Their enemy was the pessimism of the Dark Ages and the doctrine of Original Sin, which forced men to despair of their own species. Such an antagonist could not provoke them to feats of arms, but he exacted from them the utmost courage, perseverance and energy. Above all, he required them to act—to collect the doctrines and theories of the past, the experiences of the present and the premonitions of the future, and to construct them into habits of thought and conduct. This creation was not like a modern system of thought or branch of knowledge. Like the poets of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Beowulf* and *Roland*, the medieval saint formed his ideal out of the example of his forerunners and partly out of his own enthusiasms. It was something to live by. It absorbed and transfigured the whole personality and character of its adherents. It formed them into a caste, not any particular order—though many of them happened to be Franciscans or Dominicans—but a brotherhood distinguished alike for their ascetic devotion to churchmanship and to learning, however opposed on

points of doctrine. Their leaders were such men as Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventura, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, Alexander Hales, Adam Marsh, Raymund Lull, Nicholas de Lyra. Under their direction groups of men learnt to direct their energies towards the winning of victories which were none the less arduous for being moral and spiritual, and by these labours to achieve a height of power and of serenity undreamt of by mere warriors.

i. *Signs of the new spirit in Gudrun. Gawayne and the Green Knight. Piers Plowman.*

It was shown that such aspirations could hardly have found vent in the old world of chivalrous adventure. As we have seen, the medieval spirit of devout inquiry had learnt from Plato, Plutarch, the Greek mystics, Servius, and Augustin to look below the surface for hidden meanings<sup>1</sup>. Such enthusiasts would expect a story to contain some truth too deep to be communicated except by allegory. They would approach an epic or romance with Glaber's *quid igitur nobis in hoc facto innuit, quibus paene omnia in figura contingunt*<sup>2</sup>. It is therefore not surprising that many attempts were made to transform the older materialistic type of narrative into something more edifying and suggestive, and though no such experiment was completely successful, yet the tendency is too marked to be ignored.

We may take *Gudrun* as our first specimen. The romance bears traces of its prehistoric sources. Hagen is nurtured in an eagle's nest<sup>3</sup>, and when he reaches man's estate, like any other hero of the northern sagas, he becomes a mighty hunter and acquires fabulous strength by drinking dragon's blood<sup>4</sup>. Then we have the touches characteristic of the feudal epic. There is the interest in warlike equipment<sup>5</sup>; and the exaggeration of battle incidents; blood flows in rivers and when Wate blows his horn the sound can be heard thirty miles away, and all his followers are filled with courage<sup>6</sup>. And yet the new seriousness makes itself felt. The characters are not all ruthless

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. ix, §§ 1-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Historiarum Libri Quinque*, I, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Av.* II, 1-73.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 95-101.

<sup>5</sup> v, 248-68.

<sup>6</sup> v, 1392-5.

freebooters. Hagen's parting advice to his daughter Hilde<sup>1</sup>, and Wate's and Herwig's anxiety to return the ships to the pilgrims<sup>2</sup>, show that the narrative has now taken on the character of a feud between good men and bad. Again it is typical of the new age first that the good should begin by suffering defeat, secondly that they should show their greatness in affliction, and thirdly that the character who exemplifies these features is a woman. Gudrun is not merely pathetic; she becomes magnificent in her distress. There is an unmistakeable touch of devotionalism in the scene in which Hartmut *tempts* her to cease mourning for her kith and kin, to give herself up to pleasure and to lower herself so far as to become his wife<sup>3</sup>. It is from greatness of heart that she refuses love and wedlock and submits to the portion of a slave. Besides, by accepting affliction she retains her power; she inspires Hildburg with the deepest sympathy and devotion; neither Gérline nor Hartmut can ignore her presence or cease to wait on her decision<sup>4</sup>. Their savagery is a confession that they know themselves to be worsted. Thus, while weaving these old tales into an aristocratic romance of sea-raids and pirate courtships, the poet has, perhaps unconsciously, introduced a note of self-devotion, Christian loyalty and sacrifice of the flesh for the spirit. In these respects the poem becomes more truly than the *Nibelungenlied*<sup>5</sup> an epic of the later Middle Ages.

Our second example is *Gawayne and the Green Knight*. Few poems illustrate more convincingly the art of casting new ideas into some old form with which readers or listeners had for centuries been familiar. Tales of the "beheading game," the "champion's bargain" and the adventurer's "test"<sup>6</sup> are worked up into the allegory of a feudal knight who goes on an impossible adventure into a world of unreal and deceptive appearances; who is pitted against superhuman powers without knowing it, while all the time his virtue and knightly worth are undergoing a searching test which he does not even suspect. The adventures are recounted with an admirable air of

<sup>1</sup> VIII, 555-9.

<sup>2</sup> Av. xix.

<sup>3</sup> XX, 1022-XXI, 1045.

<sup>4</sup> XXI, 1273-86.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *ante*, chap. vii, § 3.

<sup>6</sup> G. L. Kittredge, *A Study of Gawayne and the Green Knight*.

mystery, and at the close the warrior's escape or reprieve comes to the reader as an unexpected and unspeakable relief. Yet the happy consummation is strictly in proportion to the knight's moral courage and purity of heart. Moreover, the poet succeeds in linking all this edification with a truly epic interest in life. The knight's arming is as elaborate as that of an Achean<sup>1</sup>; the celebrated description of the seasons<sup>2</sup> reveals all a poet's consciousness of the unexplained and generally unobserved marvels of the life around us. When Gawayne reaches the mysterious castle, the poet does not only dwell on its strength and capaciousness. The intricate and elaborate masonry of the Gothic structure<sup>3</sup> has a charm of its own apart from its comfort or military value. When the knight departs three days later amid driving snow, beneath a lowering sky<sup>4</sup>, his setting forth in the wintry twilight is described with epic fullness of detail, especially how his horse was tended and his equipment polished<sup>5</sup>. Above all we realise that his manhood is being tested by the awful warnings of his guide and by the grimness of the rocky valley in which the green chapel is found<sup>6</sup>.

And yet the poet has not quite succeeded in giving his thought the vitality of action. It is noticeable that throughout this long and picturesque narrative, he rarely gives us a glimpse into Gawayne's mind. The knight is like a figure seen from a distance, and we get an inkling of his thoughts only from the effect that the narrative has on us. At the most we are told that he wondered or was surprised. He is no epic warrior but a type of chivalry too full of edification to be real. This supposed fiery warrior from Arthur's court listens with patience to the explanation of the strange mummery that has been imposed upon him. At the hint of a fault on his part or of a lapse from perfect knighthood he is overwhelmed with shame. It is here and here only that we are allowed to appreciate his mind. The man who had the spirit to brave a mysterious giant and then to journey through hundreds of miles of wild and unknown country to face certain death,

<sup>1</sup> ll. 566-89.

<sup>2</sup> ll. 504-35.

<sup>3</sup> ll. 763-810.

<sup>4</sup> ll. 1998-2005.

<sup>5</sup> ll. 2012-20.

<sup>6</sup> ll. 2160-88.

speaks out only when he realises that covetousness and courtesy have betrayed him into what modern readers regard as a trifling peccadillo.

The defect of *Gawayne* is not in its allegorising tendency, but in its divorce from the most urgent and intimate problems of medieval life. The same is true of the well-known legends of the Holy Grail or of *Sir Amadace*, the tale of a ruined knight who by an act of Christian generosity won the attendance of a mysterious stranger, by whose help he overcame all his misfortunes. Let us then take *Piers Plowman*, the most illustrious of many failures to produce a scholastic and moral epic. Its scheme is admirable. A clerk in minor orders observes the life around him, realises only too acutely its imperfections and undertakes more than one enterprise to find out what is wrong with the world and with himself. The long, rambling narrative is so allusive and inconsequential that most readers are content to enjoy its satire without attempting to analyse its thought<sup>1</sup>. Yet it seems undeniable that we have here an attempt to tell the story of a mind's adventures. The inquirer, whether Langland or Piers, begins by concerning himself with the problems of practical life. He attains to remarkable insight into the political and economic situation; he learns to understand the causes of social unrest; he even gains insight into the mutual obligations of the three great medieval classes. Gradually he finds that such enlightenment is not enough. Even in the A text, which seems to have been composed under the influence of agricultural surroundings, and to preach the blessedness of labour, there are misgivings, questionings and allusions to "wanhop." But in the much discussed continuation in B text, the writer no longer even pretends that Truth is the discharge of duty, however faithful and disinterested. After the mind as well as the body is satisfied, the spirit, both corporate and individual, needs comfort and expansion. The real quest of this erratic visionary or wanderer is for doctrine<sup>2</sup>. If the poet could have led his hero through a series

<sup>1</sup> For notable exception see R. W. Chambers, *Long Will, Dante and the Righteous Heathen. Essays and Studies of the English Association*, vol. ix, 1923.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. B text, xix, 224 ff., xv, 39, with its quotation from Isidore.

of adventures teaching him the knowledge of God, the possibilities of his own nature and the peace of mind which comes from the contemplative life, we should have needed to look no further for the most characteristic epic of the Middle Ages.

II. *The spirit of early Christianity finds its true outlet in visions of the next world. Even the dream of immortality and the conquest of Death can thus find expression in action. Gospel of Nicodemus; Visio St Pauli. Epic imagery.*

Let us turn from these disillusioned and rather disingenuous stories of life, to the prospects offered by death. Northern nations seem from the first to have been no less anxious than the Greeks and Romans about their destiny beyond the grave or the pyre, and appear to have formed very similar ideas on their fate<sup>1</sup>. They pictured to themselves a place of torment, reserved mostly for those guilty of perjury, murder or debauchery and for certain conspicuous opponents of the gods. Before their condemnation the spirits had to stand their trial somewhere in Asgarth or near Urth's Fountain, and as each defendant was but a voiceless shadow or outline, its attendant daemon, the *hamingje*, pleaded its cause. We cannot tell whence the idea of the guardian spirit was derived. According to the gnostic and cabballistic beliefs of the Jews, every being, nay every *thing*, had its own accompanying angel<sup>2</sup>. So we may have before us an eschatology already influenced by Christianity. On the other hand, the belief in attendant spirits like the belief in the dual soul is of primeval antiquity and may have come down from prehistoric sources unaffected by foreign culture. This second explanation seems just as likely since the prisoner at the bar sometimes acquired or was granted the *mal-runes*, which enabled him to speak on his own behalf. Those who successfully passed this ordeal rejoined their friends and kinsmen in the flowery, glittering realms presided over by Mimir or Urth. The condemned were haled downwards to the Na-gates (*Nagrind*). At the sight of these portals, the entrance to Nyfelhyr, the victim was supposed to die a second time

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. III, § 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Math. xviii*, 10; *Dan. x*, 13, 20; *Deut. xxxii*, 8; *Rev. ix*, 11; *xiv*, 18; *xvi*, 5.

through rage or despair. But the *litr* could not escape from the posthumous body through which he was destined to suffer the tortures of the underworld, and by the power of runes the spirit was bound to this exterior for ever. Such seems to have been the pagan idea of death as reported in Christian times. If the picture is at all reliable, we cannot wonder that North-  
erners were as unsettled in their beliefs as the dwellers of Greece<sup>1</sup>, and that the early colonists in Iceland continued to bury their dead, believing them to be strong to watch over the houses where they had lived. For this reason invaders broke into tombs in the hope of obtaining the skull of the dead chief as a charm, and humbler folk sometimes exhumed and burnt a corpse when they found that the spirit prowled at night and overcame them by its strength and solidity. Probably no race without very good reason has given itself the pains to visualise a life after death. Even so advanced and imaginative a thinker as the author of *Job* pictures Sheol as "A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness."<sup>2</sup> In some respects the laymen of the Christian era were equally vague. The new religion did not dispel the gloom and uncertainty of death. Up to the Renaissance men seem to have doubted whether a dead man's spirit was banished to Purgatory or returned as a ghost to the scene of his former activities. We have already discussed the theories<sup>3</sup>, both pagan and Christian, which aimed at reconciling these antagonistic beliefs. And yet the doctrines of the Church exercised a profound influence on certain temperaments. They borrowed much from both classical and Scandinavian sources, but they gave a new direction to such speculations. While directing attention to the next world, Christianity revealed the possibility of recovering our lost grandeur both now and hereafter, and so vision literature of this type found its true epic scope. We can measure the enthusiasm of this cult when we remember that

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *ante*, vol. I, chap. vii, §§ 1-3; *Jamblichus, De Mysteriis*, v, 12; *Frazer, G.B.: Adonis, Attis, Osiris*, bk I, chap. vii, § 3; bk III, chap. v, § 1; *Hávarðssaga*, II; *Grettissaga* LXV; *Eyrbyggjasaga*, LXIII; *Laxdælasaga*, xvii, xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> x, 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ante*, chap. II, § 5.

mortals were expected actually to become the equals of God. It was conceived possible by dint of thought and contemplation, aided by the *Paraclet*, not only to rise for a time to the divine level, but even to become of the same substance and to enjoy the same kind of immortality.

Such dreams and ambitions found expression in the legend of Christ's descent into Hades. It is not suggested that this doctrine either derived its origin, or received its first sanction from gnosticism<sup>1</sup>. It is more likely that the crucifixion of our Lord appealed to many as a kind of riddance ceremony or, coming at the verge of the spring season, may have presented itself to even more as an act of life transference; the transfusion of human energy to the earth, which was thus revitalised and prompted to renew its growths. It is at any rate significant that during the three days' absence of Christ's spirit to the lower world, his corpse was believed to remain in the grave, though in earlier legends, as in the case of Elijah, Enoch, Herakles and Romulus, the deified hero was carried bodily to heaven. But to the imagination of idealists, this process of sympathetic magic grew into something much more inspiring. Both St Paul and St Peter<sup>2</sup> alluded to what might have happened during that mysterious adventure underground, and from their time onwards the miracle was frequently quoted and discussed. Gradually Christians seem to have discovered in that event something of immense significance for the future of the human race. Besides containing the powers of growth, the earth was also supposed to hold the powers of death and of evil. In the Norse Hell Nithhogg, the "worm" that gnaws the root of Yggdrasil<sup>3</sup>, sucks the blood of the slain and the wolf Fenris tears the corpses. That is to say the two forces which are to end the world already have free play beneath the earth<sup>4</sup>. As the divine spirit confronted these enemies of man at a time when neo-Platonism, Christianity and Gnosticism were accepted, a great victory was believed to be achieved. The transfusion of Christ's life to the fields ended in the conquest

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. ix, § 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Acts* ii, 24-31; *I Pet.* iii, 19, 20, 22; iv, 6; *Phil.* ii, 10; *Col.* i, 20; *Eph.* i, 10; iv, 9. For later quotations see Renan, *Antichrist*, chap. iii.

<sup>3</sup> *Grimnismól*, xxxii, xxxv.

<sup>4</sup> *Voluspá*, xxxix.

of the Great Adversary. It was this idea which inspired the phantasy probably composed A.D. 200-250, which Tischendorf has aptly named *Descensus Christi ad Inferos* and to which a kind of introduction was added in about the mid-fourth century and the whole then named *The Gospel of Nicodemus*<sup>1</sup>. The dramatic qualities of the story have often been admired, but the character of Christ himself is more significant. He does not come down to Hades like Herakles, Orpheus or even Aeneas, under the guidance or with the permission of some special power. He enters like an ordinary mortal as if vanquished by death. He does not return to the upper air like Eurydike, Kastor and Pollux or Protesilaos, as a special privilege for a limited period. He wins his way out by the sheer superiority of his godhead. The most impressive moments of the story are those when Hell confesses his utter defeat. Never was the legend of the god in disguise put to a more magnificent use. Christ brings the dead with Him to Heaven, leading Adam by the hand. Apparently the composer of this prose epic, and no doubt many of his readers, believed that death had really been abolished. Amongst all the later despondencies and controversies of the Middle Ages, this ambitious hope was never quite lost sight of. At least two versions of the story were attempted in Anglo-Saxon. The miniature of the Worms choir-book of the eighth or ninth century represents Christ trampling on Death<sup>2</sup> and underneath is written:

*Hic residens solio Christus iam vitor in alto  
Mortem calce premit, colligat atque premit.  
Dumque salutiferam vult mors extinguere vitam,  
Infelix hamo deperit illa suo.*

The *Phoenix* is a song of triumph over the conquest of death. Some believed that the conquest was renewed every year. Ansellus Scolasticus recounts how Christ was seen to descend from the cross one Easter-day and was followed by a monk to Hades, whence amid the despairing howls of the fiends the Saviour rescues the captive souls, and with music and singing

<sup>1</sup> *Erl. Schr. Die Pilatus Acten kritisch untersucht*, von Rich. Adel., Lipsius, Kiel, 1871.

<sup>2</sup> Reproduced, *Vie Militaire et Religieuse au Moyen Age*, by P. Lacroix, p. 505.

angels conduct them into Heaven<sup>1</sup>. In the thirteenth century we find that the harrowing of Hell is still familiar to the miracle plays; Dante believed in it<sup>2</sup>; and after Langland had spent a life-time puzzling over the way to Truth and the apparent conflict between the active and the contemplative life, he eventually found relief from his melancholy in the thought of this supernatural victory<sup>3</sup>.

Once filled with these hopes, it is surprising how ready men became to imagine for themselves a spacious future beyond the grave. The *Visio Sancti Pauli* in the fourth century is a striking illustration of the tendency. Like many another enlightened student since the days of Plato, the author believes men to be guided by divine reason, and endowed with the power of selecting and controlling their actions, and he still retains the ancient idea that every mortal is attended by his *önd*<sup>4</sup>, *genius* or perhaps *manis*<sup>5</sup>. But, no doubt influenced by oriental speculations, he pictures these guardian angels as our one remaining bond with the Divinity; the means by which God watches with paternal solicitude and influences our otherwise free movements. So he imagines that at sunset the spirits present themselves, as in the *Book of Job*, before the eternal throne, and discuss with the Father the doings of men. St Paul is then wafted in a vision to the next world. His impression of Heaven is made sensible to our imagination by gorgeous oriental imagery, but what he perceives most clearly and admires most profoundly is the justice and wisdom of the godhead. The author is endeavouring to visualise that sacred quality *The Truth* which Christ promised His disciples and which afterwards so often perplexed theologians. So he pictures a judgment seat before which every defect of character meets with its true valuation, however much misunderstood on earth. For instance, as the saint looks across Lake Acheron to the City of God, a walled town with twelve towers as in *Revelation*, he sees the proud of heart gathered under a huge tree which bears no fruit. There they must wait till the Lord

<sup>1</sup> M. G. du Méril, *Poésies pop. latines antérieures*, Paris, 1843, pp. 200-17.

<sup>2</sup> *Inf.* IV, 52-63.

<sup>3</sup> B text, *Passus xviii*, 258 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Ante*, chap. II, § 5.

<sup>5</sup> G. Warde Fowler, *Religious Experiences of the Roman People*, chap. xvii.

enters the city at the end of the world, because, however pious, their one sin made their other virtues barren.

When the visionary is ushered into Heaven and gazes on the tree of life, the virgins, the patriarchs, the prophets, with Noah, Enoch and Elias, greet him as a friend and wish him god-speed. In fact the charm of Heaven consists in its spirit of mildness and fellowship and in the intercourse with men of piety and miraculous power, and it is the contrast with this blessedness which inspires the writer to depict the punishment of evil-doers. Possibly the idea of redemption through punishment and of purification through pain may have been suggested by the Orphic cult and the other mystery religions which we have discussed<sup>1</sup>. But the author is certainly more impressed with the need of illustrating the nature of sin. Thus the sinners' penalties are all the heavier because they have had so many opportunities to repent, and have so often come into contact with the sublime beauty of heavenly things. When Deianira at last realised the full enormity of her crime, she called on Juppiter to invent special torments worthy of her deed<sup>2</sup>. So here the moralist, relieved from the restrictions of experience and of probability, has discovered that by inventing penalties you can express the loathsome nature of sin itself. He has gone yet further. In Plutarch's description of the vision of Theryptius<sup>3</sup> we find perhaps the first rudimentary attempt at analysing and explaining different sins by the nature of their punishment. The author of *Visio Sancti Pauli* may have followed his lead, but was more probably obeying his own inspiration, when he made each penalty a humiliating and anguished repetition of the crime<sup>4</sup>. Thus slanderers are forced to eat their own tongues.

Vision literature of this type gives the freest play to the intellect. As the moralist is concerned with the simplified world of shadows, he can put problems in their most elemental forms, and as the whole narrative bears the authority of a revelation, he can propound solutions with a more than human impressiveness. So we shall find from the earliest to the latest

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. ix, § 1.

<sup>2</sup> Seneca, *Herc. Oet.* 847-55.

<sup>3</sup> *Moralia*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *post*, pp. 248, 257.

visions, that these descriptive adventures became essentially the allegories or visualisations of some belief or doctrine; almost the epics of dogmatism. Such a development, being continuous, needs no special illustration at this point, but it should also be noticed that the arts of expression had to grow and expand in order to contain these far-reaching ideas and impetuous enthusiasms. The *Book of Revelation* in the first century is, of course, the most fruitful source of Christian rhetoric and its influence is to be found everywhere in the *Book of Enoch*<sup>1</sup> in the second century. It is interesting also to note that, from whatever source, the Icelanders agreed with eastern visionaries in imagining Heaven to contain the place called "Broad-gleaming" (*Breidablik*) and "Glittering" (*Glitnir*)<sup>2</sup>. Individual illustrations are more remarkable. The author of *Apocalypse of John* declared that as big a stone as a man of thirty years can roll over into an abyss, ever falling for twenty years, would not arrive at the bottom of Hades. St Antony had a vision of the Devil as a huge black giant, whose head reached the clouds, and as the souls of men flew past him he struck down the sinful ones into a vast lake at his feet<sup>3</sup>. Bishop Salvius, late in the sixth century, saw the sun, moon, stars and clouds beneath him and then entered the dazzling portal of a vast dwelling paved with gold and silver. The immensity of the abode was indescribable. When conducted into the presence of God, he found himself faced by a tremendous concentration of light, and heard a voice like the distant roar of water<sup>4</sup>. Martyrs and confessors greeted him, and he was enveloped by a perfume which assuaged all hunger and thirst<sup>5</sup>. The mercy and mildness of God are illustrated with no less aptness and eloquence. When St Paul's friend St Carpus thought he saw two heathen tottering on the brink of an abyss, out of which serpents and daemons reached upwards, and when he put out his hand to shove them in, behold, Jesus descended from Heaven and asked to be immolated for the second time in their places.

<sup>1</sup> *E.g.* xiv, 9-23.

<sup>2</sup> *Gylfaginning*, xvii. Cf. *ante*, chap. II, § 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Palladii Helenopolitani episcopi Hist. Lausiaca*, cap. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Rev.* xiv, 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Greg. de Tours, Hist. Frank.* VII, 1.

III. *The spiritual struggle of Christianity from the advent of the Dark Ages to the twelfth century is revealed in the Hades literature which accompanied it. We find reflected the horror of sin. The fear of death. The dread of uncertainty. Belief in the efficacy of prayer, and of good works. The need of fellowship. Consciousness of the physical existence of the Devil. Trust in the infinite goodness of God. Finally a sense of triumph.*

This experience is related by Dionysios Areopagita<sup>1</sup> in the first half of the sixth century and gives us some indication of the line along which vision literature might have developed. But in the meantime the downfall of the ancient world had profoundly altered the course of civilisation. We have already seen how much enthusiasm and idealism were engulfed in the Dark Ages, and how humanists and visionaries returned to the ancient tradition of wretchedness and degeneracy, and developed the doctrine of Original Sin<sup>2</sup>. This dogma (the theological reincarnation of a prehistoric sentiment) seems particularly to have impressed the northern invaders or their descendants who were for the first time laying aside paganism, and beginning to realise all that their past life and traditions involved. While their emotions were thus stirred, they seem to have found that visions of the next world<sup>3</sup> were the most satisfying outlet to their imaginations. Some of the most significant have been recorded in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and of these, the vision vouchsafed to Furseus is justly regarded as the best. The composer<sup>4</sup> is inspired by the promise *ibunt sancti de uirtute in uirtutem et uidebitur deus deorum in Sion*. That is to say, he is no mere terrorist, he realises the principle so beneficial in the later Middle Ages that a man who had gained mastery over his own words and deeds, and by prolonged study and meditation had learnt all that could be known of God as

<sup>1</sup> Ed. Corderius, 1755-6, vol. I, pp. 608-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, chap. ix, § 5.

<sup>3</sup> Many of the visions mentioned in this and the following section are recorded or discussed by Wright, *St Patrick's Purgatory*; Fritzsche, *Die Lat. Vis. des Mittelalters in Romanische Forschungen*, III, IV; d'Ancona, *I Precursori di Dante*. The present writer does not wish to conceal his indebtedness, but the views taken are his own.

<sup>4</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* III, 19.

He is manifested on this earth, should then by dint of holiness win to the next stage of seeing beyond this world into what happens after death. So this is a vision of Heaven and not of Hell. But the outlook is very different from that of the earlier visions. What now most impresses the saint is the way evil and malignant spirits beset the course of those journeying towards Heaven, and try to frustrate their progress by repeated accusations. Again, while soaring to the heights, he is bidden to look down, and beholds the world *quasi vallem tenebrosam subter se in imo positam*, and, hard by, four fires burning in the air. These four conflagrations represent the four besetting sins of the world and are destined one day to destroy the earth, and though the visionary and his guide pass through them unscathed, the accusations of spiteful spirits still pursue him. Heaven has little more to offer him than edifying discourse, so deeply is his mind preoccupied by the menace of sin. On his return the conflagration opens to let him pass, but as a last greeting, the daemons fling the soul of a victim at Furseus, who by the contact is scorched on his shoulder and jaw. The spirit had been a sinner and so the scar remains on Furseus till his dying day.

This vision has a certain philosophical tendency. There is less said about particular sins than about the sinful tendencies of life, the half-and-half nature of humanity; the precariousness of the human soul always conterminous with guilt. But most visions of this period differ, in that they aim at horrifying into godliness. Some merely raise a smile in the modern reader, but others show genuine insight. For instance Gregory the Great added a new terror to death by frightening mortals with the prospect of a test. He tells<sup>1</sup> how a soldier, dying of the plague, beheld a bridge which led over a foul river exhaling stench and fog. On the further shore, there were meadows decked with sweet-smelling flowers, yet no soul knew, when he set foot on the bridge, whether he would reach the other side, for those unworthy of Heaven fell into the loathsome stream. Even when this hazard had been evaded, the initiate was not free from the dread of detection. Those admitted to

<sup>1</sup> *Dialog.* iv, 36.

the celestial meadows, built themselves dwellings with golden tiles, which represent their acts of charity. But as sensuality, being a vice of the body, stains an otherwise clear spirit, and darkens all its bright actions, so a pestilential vapour rises from the river and enshrouds the golden dwellings of those who were guilty of fleshly lusts. But it is the precarious journey across the bridge which oppresses the imagination like a nightmare.

The idea of a passage now becomes a feature of such visions. Boniface tells the abbess Eadburga<sup>1</sup> how a monk in Wenlok monastery saw a beam thrown across a fiery stream which all had to cross. The sin-stained fell in and then continued their progress cleansed, or, according to another revelation<sup>2</sup>, those who fell in remained immersed till the last judgment day, unless released by prayers or divine interposition. Besides this hint of Purgatory, we have a glance at the waiting-place of the righteous. It was a land covered with flowers. From it led a path to a more beautiful Heaven; thence to another yet more beautiful and so to the most beautiful of all. Fritzsche, quoting Hübschmann<sup>3</sup>, suggests that these eschatologists were thinking of ancient Persian mythology, and would then consider their interpretations confirmed by Christ's words, "Straight is the gate and narrow is the way." But doctrinaires of this period would have been equally impressed by the noticeable absence of any bridge in the parable of Dives and Lazarus; and it is just as likely that Furseus or Bede or Boniface or even Gregory were not unacquainted with the bridge of northern mythology, named Bifröst, leading from earth to the Heaven-crag (Himinbjörg) at the end of Heaven in *Gylfaginning*<sup>4</sup>, or the passage which Thorkill traversed when he entered Ugarthilocus's hideous abode<sup>5</sup>. But in any case the significance of the figure is not in its source, but in the application. It symbolises admirably the precarious position of man; his accessibility to insidious attacks; and shows how little time he

<sup>1</sup> *Ep. x*, written before 717.

<sup>2</sup> *Ep. cxii.*

<sup>3</sup> *Die Persische Lehre von Jenseits und Jüngsten Gericht.* (*Jahrbücher für protest. Theol.* 5<sup>er</sup> Jahrgang, Leipzig, 1877.)

<sup>4</sup> XIII and XVII.

<sup>5</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus, Gesta Danorum*, VIII, lxxxv<sup>b</sup>, p. 1420 ff.

has to cherish a dream of heavenly beauty and divine goodness. It also suggests how few, if any, are absolutely cut off from the hope of escaping the pains of Hell. Perhaps it is for this reason that Dante alludes, though rather confusedly, to the existence of a bridge, but finds that in his world of clearly defined dogmas and classified sins the passage is broken and abolished<sup>1</sup>.

The depressing consciousness of sin, which is so noticeable in the visions recorded by Bede and Gregory, has also clouded the *Visio Baranti*<sup>2</sup>, which is otherwise one of the most charming human documents of the Middle Ages. Nothing could be more pleasing than the way the brethren rally round the dying man, offering their spiritual aid in his extremity. So he passes into a trance while they remain to pray. It is noticeable that these visions seem sometimes to have been inspired by a text which has caught the writer's imagination. In this case it is the promise "In my Father's house there are many mansions"; though it should be remembered that Valhal had five hundred and forty portals<sup>3</sup>. So he pictures Heaven as full of doors leading into different chambers. Behind each of the first three, he finds some class of saint who has won Heaven by innocence, but the chamber within the fourth is filled with such intense brilliance that he turns away dazzled. During the whole of this wonderful adventure, the traveller and his guide have been dogged by daemons. During the first stage of his trance, when his spirit had lain paralysed, caught between life and death, they had tormented him. Even when he reached Paradise, they would not relinquish their hoped-for prey, till St Peter beat them off. The visionary would fain shut his eyes to the prospect of Hell, but he feels forced to warn the brethren of its presence, though rather than describe its terrors, he explains that the smoke and fog obscured his vision, and he adds a sublime touch to relieve the impression. The damned who have a single good action to their credit are granted, in the sixth hour, a portion of manna from Heaven to sustain them in their agony.

<sup>1</sup> *Inf.* xviii, 16-18; xxiii, 33-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Deutschl. Geschichtsquellen*, i, 227.

<sup>3</sup> *Grimnismól*, xxiii; *Gylfaginning*, xl.

This graceful and humanised fantasy found but few echoes in the eighth or ninth century. The period which begins with the death of Charlemagne and corresponds to the first visits of the Danes to England, is rightly regarded as one of the most barren of literature in the history of Europe. But the age was not barren in the study of what interested it most—the understanding and frustrating of death. From this point of view the *Visio Wettini*<sup>1</sup> has its own significance. The story begins with the record of a human being's last day on earth and the reader must imagine that the saints and the fiends are gathering in two opposing armies in the hope of capturing his soul. This background of spiritual agencies is thrown into relief by a series of highly dramatic scenes. Finally the Devil himself appears in the garb of a cleric and tries to fill the dying man with terror at his approaching dissolution. At last an angel in streaming red drives away these birds of ill-omen, Wettin awakes, implores the brethren to sing psalms for his welfare and again falls asleep. What dreams will bring him comfort in his need? An angel appears and carries him away through marble mountains to the fiery stream in which mortals, who once enjoyed respect, and especially priests and monks, undergo a purgatory for their hidden sins. Then he reaches a vast wall of indescribable beauty, built with glittering arches. It encircles Heaven, and when he has entered, he is again warned of his approaching death and all the saints are invoked to supplicate the Almighty for his soul. Each in turn arises, his golden crown on his head, throws himself down before the throne and begs forgiveness for Wettin's sins. Then come the Martyrs and then the Holy Maidens; nor is the blessed service of intercession relinquished, till the Virgin herself has interceded.

Thus this vision is the complete imaginative expression of what the *Visio Baranti* suggests, that Death and Evil must be faced, not as Beowulf and Siegfried faced their monsters, but in serried ranks. Pachomius had first revealed this truth to the East, but it was not till St Benedict had made trial of both

<sup>1</sup> Recorded in prose by Abbot Heito, and in hexameters by Walahfrid, *Poetae latini aevi Carolini* (E. Duemmler), II, pp. 268-75, 301-33.

kinds of life, that the West changed the ideal of the hermit for that of the cenobite. As frère Lorens said long afterwards, "Hit ne may naȝt by þet þe bene of uele guode men; ne is y. herd."<sup>1</sup> But Wettin's vision looks yet further and discovers, or rather reminds the brethren, that the dying soldier of Christ has on his side all those who were preparing for the struggle and all those who have themselves victoriously striven with the same enemy. About the same time or some ten years later, Prudentius of Troyes (835-61) learnt<sup>2</sup> that the souls of the righteous offered supplication every day for the sins of their weaker brothers. Without this intercession, the race would long ago have been destroyed. But of course the truth is revealed to him in an allegory. He is led to a place covered with beautiful buildings, and on entering the church he finds a number of boys engaged in the obscure and priestly office of reading books. The lines are alternately composed of black and red letters and the visionary learns that the black are the good deeds, the red the evil, and the readers are the souls of the righteous.

The great imaginative effort of this period is the vision granted to Anscar, archbishop of Bremen, and recorded by Rimbert<sup>3</sup>. The dreams are worth consideration because they contain an ideal of purity and a study of piety hardly capable of expression in any other kind of literature. While still a little boy, Anscar finds himself in a slimy miry region and sees his mother, who had recently died, walking with others along a pleasant path nearby. He strives to reach her, but is prevented by the mud. Then, in heavenly beauty, the Virgin appears and warns him to lay aside all childishness and sloth, if he would ever rejoin his mother. So the boy devoted himself to a life of piety and self-sacrifice and years afterwards he was granted the opportunity of accomplishing his purgation while still alive, so that he might be qualified to behold the wonders of Heaven with the eyes of the flesh. Thus by revelation he

<sup>1</sup> *Somme des Vices et des Vertus*. Transl. by Don Michel, *Ayenbite of Inwyt*, fol. 68 c.

<sup>2</sup> *Visio cuiusdam religiosi praesbiteri de terra Anglorum*. See *Annales Bertiniani*, year 839.

<sup>3</sup> c. A.D. 876, rec. Waitz, caps. 2-5.

learns that Paradise is not so much a source of joy and repose as a place where the longing for righteousness has free play. The essence of that existence is so spiritual, that the visionary cannot penetrate to its true significance. As far as can be perceived by the senses of the flesh, the centre of Heaven appears to be an intense light which cannot be approached yet does not dazzle, to which the saints eagerly bend their gaze, and from which they derive their glory. Undoubtedly the visionary was chiefly inspired by the text which Don Michel paraphrased, “þet is þe blissinge of angles and of halzen of paradis. þet yȝy god ine þe face | yknawe enne God ine þri persones.”<sup>1</sup> As Anscar bowed low before this brilliant burning holiness, a voice proclaimed that he had been singled out for martyrdom and so with mingled feelings the visionary returned to earth.

Thus by the eleventh century this curious and abundant literature had found its scope and range. It had proved itself to be the best concrete expression of the idea of holiness, of the yearning effort towards perfection, of the consciousness of the immense inheritance of barbarian dreads and longings which must be suppressed or etherialised. It was probably imagined that all men would have enjoyed such revelations, had they not fallen in the scale of creation through Adam's sin. And yet the modern reader cannot help feeling that the narratives which we have so far discussed embrace only the monk's point of view. The visions may illustrate a spirited attempt to redirect human ambition and energy towards the true paths of progress, but the godliness inculcated is after all a “cloistered virtue.” Even the well-known voyage of St Brandan is no exception. An eleventh-century biographer of this sixth-century saint tells how he embarks with fourteen others in search of *terra promissionis*. No need to add that the crew are monks. They see many wonders. They find that the angels condemned to eternal vagrancy for remaining neutral in Satan's rebellion are allowed a brief repose each Easter-day on a beautiful island. They see the barren isolated rock on which Judas enjoys a respite from his tortures. At last, after seven years' wandering, the explorers reach an enormous

<sup>1</sup> *Ayenbite of Inwyt*, fol. 76 A.

island, shrouded in darkness, and within its confines lies hidden the promised land, a country of eternal day and ever-blooming fruit. No student of the original will deny that this charming narrative admirably develops the ideal of divine mercy—those touches of pity, that dignified relenting even at the moment of imposing eternal justice—which constitutes the true humanism of the Middle Ages. The ideal exercised more influence than is sometimes supposed. A sermon of the twelfth or thirteenth century<sup>1</sup> declares of Sunday, “On þon deie þa engles of heofene ham iblissieð, forði þe þa erming saulen habbeð rest of heore pine,” and tells how St Michael and St Paul went down to Hell, and after seeing the horror of torments, begged the Lord to grant relief to the damned every Sunday. It must also be noted that the author of the *Voyage* is a man of wide reading and imagination. As a dweller of the *insula doctorum et sanctorum*, he may have known something of the *Voyage of the Maeldun* and perhaps of some version of the *Odyssey*, and even so exacting a moralist as Alcuin<sup>2</sup> could hardly have objected to these spirited heathen tales when coupled with such pious edification. And yet, when the student begins to assimilate the visionary's outlook and range of sympathy, he must feel as if he were surveying a landscape from an archer's loophole. The view is not so narrow as he had supposed, thanks to the shape of the aperture, but owing to the distance it is too much like a miniature. It appears that a few steps will take the traveller across the water-logged valley, over the stream, through the tangled wood and so to the top of the cliff on the opposite side. So simple, even if arduous, was the way to Heaven.

iv. *The Hades-vision becomes the chief resource of the anti-rationalists, and the means of representing the eternal issues with allegorical lucidity.* Visio Fulberti. Visio Alberichi. *The penalty the symbol of the crime.* The Purgatory of St Patrick. Visio Tundali. *Review of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.*

We have already discussed<sup>3</sup> the explanation and we have found that sometime in the eleventh or twelfth century, a

<sup>1</sup> *In Diebus Dominicis*, E.E.T.S., Old Engl. Homilies, 1st series.

<sup>2</sup> *Mon. Germ., Epst. Carol.* II, 124. <sup>3</sup> *Ante*, chap. v, § 3; chap. vi, § 2.

period was reached in which the problem of life was solved and human beings saw their way clearly. The warrior caste had found its proper sphere in feudalism and in the Crusades. The spirituality was no less fortunate. Monasticism had taught them to prepare for the gift of Grace by a life of strenuous activity and self-denial, aided by each other's prayers and examples. Thus men of action felt the influence of Heaven and men of religion did not shrink from contact with the world. So we should have expected the obsession of Original Sin to have faded away from men's thoughts. Life might still have seemed to contemporaries to be as immeasurably far from perfection as it does at the present time, but surely a balance had been struck between aspiration and achievement. Men had discovered the way to advance towards the realisation of their ideals. So the sense of corporate failure and of hereditary taint ought to have vanished, and life ought to have continued to be as simple as it appears to be in these monkish visions.

We have already discussed<sup>1</sup> how and why the world again lost its way. It is enough to recall that as feudalism suffered from the after-effects of the Crusades, and as monachism realised the continual difficulty of maintaining poverty and singleness of aim, the failure of man to maintain even his own high level became glaring. So the consciousness of Original Sin again settled on the race and thoughtful men, of whatever rank or denomination, confessed that they must look yet further, if they were to find the kingdom of God on earth. This problem was complicated by the new spirit of scepticism and scientific inquiry which made itself felt at the beginning of the thirteenth century, largely under the auspices of Frederick II<sup>2</sup>. Many thoughtful and idealistic humanists, who were just as eager for the truth as Averroës, Avicenna, Juda ben Salomo, or Michael Scot, nevertheless refused to believe that the divine spirit could be discovered in his works. As Rolle declared, God *inscibile est et indocibile*<sup>3</sup>, and they felt that the investigation of nature could leave only a misleading impression of the ethereal and all-pervasive spirit behind phenomena. So it is not surprising

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chaps. vii-x.

<sup>3</sup> *Incend. Am. lib. i, cap. vi.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, chap. x, § 3.

that Dante placed both Frederick and Scot in the *Inferno*<sup>1</sup> and that long afterwards Pascal, Jeremy Taylor and Milton denied that knowledge could lead to Truth<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, they clung to the belief that they still had left in them the power of Reason, which though originally the cause of the Fall was still the one link with the divine. In the words of Dan Jon Gaytryge, "He made skilwyse creatours Angelle and man, of witt and wysdom to knawe God Almyghtyn, and, thorowe þaire knawynge, leofe Hym and serue Hym." By the concentrated exercise of this faculty they hoped to see far more deeply into God's essence than by experiments in metals, measurements of the distance of the stars, or the anatomising of the human body. The *Speculum S. Edmundi*, composed in the middle of the thirteenth century, is a good example of how this insight might be cultivated. It must be remembered that this age had none of the appliances of modern research, but that no epoch was so well equipped to meditate on the greatness and universality of God and on the vileness of man. As St Bernard said, "Te quia corpore non queo pectore saepe penetro."<sup>3</sup> By such efforts of the intellect and the imagination, they hoped to get as near as possible to God and to come directly into touch with the divine influence, "for ofte es better a gud thoghte in haly meditacyon þan many wordes sayd in prayere," says the author of *The Abbaye of S. Spirit*. So only could mortals prepare to receive grace and counteract the effects of Original Sin, which seemed again to be weighing so heavily on the human race.

Visions of Heaven and Hell still proved to be the most congenial exercise for this state of mind, and there were special reasons why men should continue to cultivate them. The early enthusiasms of Christians had led their descendants into a strange error. They believed in the interactions of soul and body being so close that the spirit could endow the flesh with its qualities or again the flesh impregnate the spirit. Thus, when they had persuaded themselves that death had been conquered

<sup>1</sup> *Inf.* x, 119; xx, 115.

<sup>2</sup> *Pensées*, i, 1; xii, 1 and 2; *Holy Living*, iv, § 1; *Paradise Lost*, vii, 118-24; viii, 167-8, 194-7; xi, 86-9.

<sup>3</sup> *De Contemptu Mundi*, i.

and that the soul only slept, they believed that this immortality must be communicated to the corpse also. The practice or the reports of embalming must have added to this ambitious hope, and Bede's *History* records many instances of the body being preserved in all its freshness by the purity of the spirit<sup>1</sup>. But as time went on, and other signs pointed to the decadence of man, it became only too obvious that bodies were devoured by worms. Well might St Edmund, though he believed in the kinship of man with God<sup>2</sup>, declare, "Fyrste, als vn-to þi body: þou erte now vylere þan any mukke; þou was getyn of sa vile matire and sa gret fylthe, þat it es schame for to nevynn and abhomynacyon for to thynke; þou sall be delyuerde to tades and to neddyrs for to ete."<sup>3</sup> The sight of corpses thus hideously disfigured reminded the devotee of what the souls must at the same time be suffering, for it was believed that the greatest joys and sorrows of this world were often mere counterparts or manifestations of what was passing in Heaven or Hell<sup>4</sup>. In the *Gylfaginning*<sup>5</sup>, Hell is described as full of serpents and the *Voluspo*<sup>6</sup> tells us that in the hall on Nastrand venom drops through the smoke-vent and adders wind through the walls. Besides, visions of Heaven and especially of Hell were of the nature of revelations and served, no doubt, as an offset or compensation to the unlawful prying of alchemists and magicians. From the earliest times it was believed that the secrets of the underworld should not be revealed. It is recorded with horror and surprise in the *Iliad*<sup>7</sup> how the brazen realm was once rent open. In the *Odyssey*<sup>8</sup> it is confessed that no deity in his proper shape will allow himself to be spied on. Vergil prays for special permission to disclose the mysteries which were revealed to Aeneas<sup>9</sup>, and so does Theseus after returning from his infernal adventure<sup>10</sup>. In *Revelation*<sup>11</sup> we learn that the pit was sealed, Salvius<sup>12</sup> repented of describing his vision, and both Leucius and Carinus<sup>13</sup> called for writing

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. III, § 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Speculum*, xvii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* II, mid-fourteenth century transl.

<sup>4</sup> Caesarius von Heisterbach, I, 22 and 32.

<sup>5</sup> LII.

<sup>6</sup> XXXVIII.

<sup>7</sup> XX, 57-66.

<sup>8</sup> X, 573.

<sup>9</sup> *Aen.* VI, 264-7.

<sup>10</sup> *Sen. Herc. Fur.* 658-61.

<sup>11</sup> XX, 1-3.

<sup>12</sup> *Hist. Frank.* VII, I.

<sup>13</sup> *Desc. Chri. ad Inf.* (Lat. version), I (17).

materials because they durst not speak of what they had seen. St Paul was supposed to have been ravished to the third heaven but what was there revealed to him were *archana quae non licet homini loqui*<sup>1</sup>. By what right, then, did mortals come to know these secrets? As a concession to their helplessness.

*Gret loue vr lord him kudde: whon he him schewede þere  
So muche of his priuyte: þe while he alyue were*<sup>2</sup>.

From the twelfth century onwards it was felt more and more fully that this life was too superficial and too full of deceptive appearances to allow pious men to direct their minds aright. In fact, therein lay the chief problem of the later Middle Ages. No man would have experienced difficulty in regaining union with God, had he been able to see things as they really are. These visions were considered to be revelations to explain the mystery of evil and the dazzling triumph of holiness. They put the truth before the votary with praeternatural clearness. So there was good reason for the advice which frère Lorens gave: “þanne yef þou wylt ywyte huet is guod and huet is kuead: guo out of þi ȝelue. guo out of þe wordle. lierne to sterue. todel þine zaule uram þe bodye be þoȝte. ȝend þine herte into þe oþre wordle: þet is to heuens. into helle | into purgatore. þer þou sselt yȝy: huet is guod and huet is kuead.”<sup>3</sup> When “Owen the Warrior” was permitted to see Heaven the Holy Ghost descended on him like a flame and burnt away the dross of earth<sup>4</sup>. But generally it seems to have been some particularly pious man who was allowed to penetrate the secrets of the underworld and to reveal them to his fellows. Richard Rolle, looking back no doubt over a far greater collection of revelations than has survived, recognises two kinds of vision: one in which the theolept is ravished out of the body, as was St Paul, the other, a higher and more perfect experience, when the initiate pierces the veil and perceives the truth by sheer power of contemplation<sup>5</sup>, *divina contemplacio sed nunquam corporalis regiminis substraccio*. In either case,

<sup>1</sup> *Officium de S. Richardo de Hampole.*

<sup>2</sup> *Life of St Dunstan*, ll. 115-16.

<sup>3</sup> *Somme des Vices et des Vertus*, as transl. into Kentish dialect, as *Ayenbite of Inuyt*.

<sup>4</sup> *Oswain Miles*, ll. 385 ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Incend. Am. lib. II, cap. vii.*

he believed that insight into these visions brought wisdom<sup>1</sup>, *Perspicacia in sapientiae spectacula*.

These newer and more intellectual tendencies first become noticeable in the *Visio Fulberti*<sup>2</sup>, in which a French nobleman dreams that his soul and body are sundered by death and enter upon a debate on the vexed and complicated question of mutual responsibility for sin. In the end two terrible daemons appear and hale both the disputants to Hell. Yet the reader's last impression is not one of horror; it is rather a glimpse of an ideal which might have been, of the intellect according with the soul and of both uniting to enoble the body. However, the more speculative mood did not find full expression till *Visio Alberichi*<sup>3</sup> was produced in 1129. The son of a nobleman, while still a boy, falls into a trance and is conducted into the next world. The author seems anxious to keep close to tradition. We meet the huge serpent of Norse legend, that swallows its victims like insects. We cross a bridge, which the righteous easily traverse; but, when the wicked reach the middle, the path narrows to a thread and they fall wallowing into the stream, till their sins are washed away. The potency of Original Sin is so absolutely recognised that children one year old, even though baptised, have to suffer for seven days on burning coals. Nor, on the other hand, is the vision darkened by the fatalism of the sixteenth century. No one is left to suffer in Hell for all eternity, except Judas, Annas, Caiaphas and Herod. An angel catches the tears which one sinner sheds, and when the Devil appeared at his couch and produced the book of his offences, they are poured on to the pages and the writing disappears. Again there is the usual irony in the punishments. For instance, the medieval system of fasts and penances was entitled "scala peccatorum,"<sup>4</sup> so those who neglected these impositions must now climb a red hot ladder, one round for each day of the year. But the real significance of the vision arises from the skill with which the author adapts the medieval

<sup>1</sup> *De Emend. Vit.* xii.

<sup>2</sup> Méril, *Poésies pop. lat.* Paris, 1843, pp. 217-31.

<sup>3</sup> Dante, Ausgabe Padua, 1882, v, pp. 287-328.

<sup>4</sup> "þis is alle sinfulle monne leddre þet heo sculen in to heouene stiȝen"—*Sermo in Marcum*, viii, 34, E.E.T.S., Old Engl. Homilies, 1st series.

practice of making the penalty the symbol of the crime. When, for example, St Louis convicted a goldsmith of blasphemy, Joinville tells us that he exposed the man in public with pig's guts wound round the mouth which had uttered such foulness, and Froissart<sup>1</sup> describes how Sir Hugh Spencer was made to feel the pretentiousness and absurdity of his rebellion by the guise under which he was led through England. These and many other such methods seem crude to us, but they had in them one merit: they brought home to the spectators and often to the offender the vileness of the crime; and sometimes compelled him to feel thus late the shame which ought to have withheld him from its commission. It was natural to imagine that such a system was applied in Hell. Caesarius explains: *patenter ostenditur quod Deus puniat peccatum post hanc vitam, si ante deletum non fuerit, per satisfactionem secundum quantitatem, secundum qualitatem, secundum numerum et secundum modum*<sup>2</sup>. When applied to moral transgressions, such a system opened endless vistas to the imagination. An earlier vision had related how women guilty of abortion were compelled to listen to the reproaches of their unborn children. The author pays this episode the compliment of preserving it, and then goes on to devise or recall other torments which strike home to the criminal's conscience. Tyrants, scorched in fire, must listen continually to the outcries of their subjects. Murderers are condemned to carry attached to them a daemon in the shape of their victim. Thieves, whose hands were once so busy, are now weighted down with iron chains. The initiate is afterwards allowed to visit Heaven, but the spectacle, largely based on *Revelation*, cannot have proved very edifying even for his contemporaries. The author is at his best when explaining the penalties. In this period, descriptions are often purely terrifying, sometimes with hardly a pretence at divine inspiration. For instance, in *Sawles Warde*, Prudence sends to the soul, which is represented as a house, the lank and livid messenger Fear, who gives the inmates the most blood-curdling and hair-raising description of Hell: "nawt tah efter þat hit is. for þat ne mei na tunge tellen. ah efter þat ich mes ant con. þer

<sup>1</sup> *Chron.* xii.

<sup>2</sup> I, 31, 44. Cf. *post*, p. 257.

towart ich chulle readien." Albert does not rely on such crude effects. Nor again does he describe penalties in the spirit which made Bertrand de Bern exclaim "così s' osserva in me le contrappasso."<sup>1</sup> The writer illustrates the purifying virtue of suffering. The idea of Purgatory had been hinted at as early as Driht-helm, who learnt that the victim's lot is alleviated by the prayers of the living, but it is not till the *Visio Alberichi* that the moral effect of purgatorial punishments is seen. For instance, in one region the visionary finds that sinners flee through a tract of thorn-bushes, pursued by the Devil mounted on a dragon and wielding a viper as scourge. Under such horrible conditions they now experience in breathless terror the loathing with which sin ought to have inspired them during life.

Such are the harsh but salutary punishments of Purgatory. Whoever wishes to know the true joys of Heaven, he will find them in the story of the Irish knight Oeneus or Owain. In 1140 Henricus Salteriensis tells how this warrior, as a penance, resolved to explore the ominous chasm known as "The Purgatory of St Patrick."<sup>2</sup> There is hardly a terror familiar to medieval daemonology which the adventurer was not called upon to encounter, but these appalling manifestations are employed only to test his courage. When his spirit is thus cleansed by fear, the true revelation comes. He passes through a bejewelled door set in a wall, and, for the first time in medieval culture, a mortal realises what man would have become, had the Original Sin never been committed. He meets bishops, abbots, monks and elders; much of their glory, as described, is borrowed from the growing splendour of cathedral worship, but one more distinctive touch shows how Heaven continues, yet transcends, earth. They all wear the kind of dress which they wore on earth, so that their rank can easily be recognised. The quality and colour of their garments vary according to their spiritual merit, just as one star outshines another. All have undergone the tortures of Purgatory, and now they repose in meadows covered with flowers and fruit trees, and every day

<sup>1</sup> Dante, *Inf.* xxviii, 112.

<sup>2</sup> *Florilegium Insulae Sanctorum....* Thomas Massinghamus, Parisiis, 1634, pp. 86-109.

the divine spirit descends on them like a flame. One day they will be permitted to enter God's presence in the highest Heaven and thus the "scale or ladder of creation" will be consummated as was at first designed.

Except, of course, for the *Divina Commedia*, the stories of Albert and Owain are unmatched in Hades literature for religious insight and refinement of feeling. The *Visio Tundali* is certainly better known and surpasses them in graphic detail. The adventure might well be termed an *Odyssey of Death*, and the nightmare horrors which the knight has to witness and in some cases to undergo in retribution for his sins, impress themselves even now in a way that is unforgettable. Before this terrible experience Tundal had been a man of the world, handsome and courageous, but pleasure-loving; and we may well believe the monkish scribe at St Paul's convent, Ratisbon, that on returning to life the knight resolved to lead a more pious life. But though permitted to enjoy a sight of Heaven and even to view the nine orders of angels, Tundal cannot have found much edification in these revelations. If his soul was saved, it was only by fear, and for that reason his vision is not to be compared with those which we have discussed more fully.

The last three hundred years of the Middle Ages, with the one sublime exception, add little that is positively new to the accepted ideas of the next world. Visions and revelations are produced in greater numbers, and with the multiplication of homilies, *exempla*, debates, *fabliaux*, the allusions to Heaven, Hell and Purgatory become too frequent to be counted, much less classified. But on the whole it may be said that the age of scholastic learning and mysticism was content to accept on tradition the principles, while infinitely varying the details. Men were learning in every generation to express themselves more fully in sculpture, painting and the drama, as well as in words, and these new arts necessarily imposed their own limitations. They helped men to think in symbols and to appeal to the senses. Hence on the one hand, the frequency of cauldrons, dragons'-mouths, tiny naked dolls for souls, horned and tailed goblins, and on the other hand aureoles, wings and musical

instruments. Many of the descriptions of Purgatory and Paradise, most of which seem so graphic though conventional, are to be taken allegorically. As Hilton says<sup>1</sup>: "It may be felid and perceyved in a saule, bot it may not be schewed." Or in the words of Caesarius von Heisterbach<sup>2</sup>: *Quae incorporea non nisi per corporea corporis narrare posse.* Oddly enough Cicero<sup>3</sup> pronounces a similar opinion on a similar subject. Some experts seem to be occupied by such speculations as the distance of Heaven from Hell, or the structure and disposition of the infernal circles, or the arrangement of phenomena into threes, fives and sevens to correspond with theological dogmas or perhaps out of respect for the mystic power of numbers. A surprisingly large number seems, like the author of *Pearl*, to be affected by the heresy of Jovinian, and nearly all dwell on the theological distinction between Paradise and Purgatory as opposed to Heaven and Hell. The most humanistic have begun to lay aside mythological exaggeration and appeal to the sentiments by mirroring what we might expect to meet with in this life, whether with fears or hopes. Thus the author of *The Prick of Conscience* not only finds in Purgatory the cares and despondencies of this world, but even the actual diseases (perhaps suggested by the *Aeneid*), and his imagination seems to be touched with the same realistic spirit as is found in the account of Niflheim in *Gylfaginning*, xxxiv. In an age when sewers annoyed the air and the evil smell of a city could be sensed miles away, it is not surprising that filth becomes more and more a punishment of Purgatory. The monk of Evesham found "that the greuys pain of that same stenche ys more intollerable and paynfulle than any other peynys that synners sofryn."<sup>4</sup> The same visionary fills Heaven with the sound of bells<sup>5</sup>, while another poet compares the angelic hymns in Heaven to the choir singing "Kyrie Eleison" at Mass<sup>6</sup>, and Caesarius brings in an almost romantic touch of mariolatry when he describes *angelorum domina ultro omnem aestimationem radians*, who calls the newcomer to her and embraces him as if he were her child<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Angel's Song.*

<sup>5</sup> Cap. LXII.

<sup>2</sup> III, 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Life of St Dunstan*, I, 117.

<sup>3</sup> *Tusc. Disp.* I, 16, 37.

<sup>7</sup> III, 75.

<sup>4</sup> Cap. xxvii.

v. *Hades literature, both in pagan and Christian times, seems to be searching for the appropriate type of hero. Gradually the intellectual or spiritual adventurer is evolved. Dante is the most perfect example.*

Since the visions of Hades multiply to such an extent and cover so wide a field of human interests, we may conclude that the later stages of medieval culture were eminently congenial to the development of this type of literature. The greatest of all visionaries appeared as late as the beginning of the fourteenth century, and though his eminence is won and retained by sheer poetic genius, yet it is impossible to agree with Croce<sup>1</sup> that the theme and form of his poetry were a positive hindrance to its excellence and that the age had but little influence on his inspiration. Dante achieved a masterpiece partly because he realised that the greatest of all adventures must have a hero, and though the *Inferno* begins with mock-modest disclaimers, the reader has no difficulty in discovering that the hero is Dante himself. The Florentine is no master of heroic deeds, but all that has been said in this chapter will make clear what type of man was needed to visit the next world: he must be the master of moral power and of immense aspirations, he must be thirsting for the Truth which can be revealed only in eternity.

We have traced the development of this type in pre-Christian literature<sup>2</sup>. With the dawn of Christianity, the search for the intellectual hero is continued or renewed. Apart from superficial imitations, of which Dieterich has collected a surprising number<sup>3</sup>, this is the real link between classical and medieval vision literature. The idea of a God conquering death is infinitely inspiring; as we have seen, the idea was too life-giving to be lost; yet no Christ can conquer Hell as an earthly hero, and so all the harrowings of Hell lack the human touch. Another writer has tried St Paul. His authority is one vague allusion<sup>4</sup>, but his real sanction is the feeling that the apostle was worthy of the initiation. He was imagined to have been once a man of the world, as represented in *The Digby Plays*,

<sup>1</sup> *La Poesia di Dante.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chaps. v–viii.

<sup>3</sup> *Nekyia*, Leipzig, 1893.

<sup>4</sup> *II Cor.* xii, 2–4.

“goodly besene in the best wyse like an aunterous knyth”; his conversion was praeternaturally rapid and the piety, insight and enthusiasm of his later life would give full value to the revelation<sup>1</sup>. As monasticism developed and the corporate spirit of each house grew strong, there is a tendency among the recorders of visions to attribute their descriptions to some brother, or familiar of the house, and no doubt much of the significance of some visions is lost, because we do not know what memories of this or that character were treasured. The twelfth century witnessed a widening and intensifying of vision literature and an interesting attempt to couple such experiences with men of action and power, such as Owain, Albert and Tundal. Apparently the intention was to emphasise the tremendous and unfamiliar test of their courage and the particular mercy of God, as these were the types who most needed salvation<sup>2</sup>. Yet it cannot be denied that the experiences would have seemed more impressive if the visionaries had more capacity for thought. Again, Wright has noticed the quite obvious resemblance of these visions to fairy stories, especially of knights or travellers who trespass on to enchanted ground, and he cites the example of *Thomas and the Elf Queen*<sup>3</sup>. This atmosphere of mysterious adventure is always bound to be attractive. Schiller<sup>4</sup> felt its spell when he described the diver's descent into the caverns beneath the surface. But when dealing with the lower world, romance can only impart episodes which are more effective above ground<sup>5</sup>. The lotus-eaters, Polyphemus, Kirke, and Skylla are all the kind of beings which have been met with in the next world, yet Homer was far too wise to put them in Hades or on Olympos.

The Hades-vision must be an adventure into hidden knowledge which can be gained only by men who have earned the privilege. That is why we need

*Clerkes that can of lare  
If that thaire cunyng will declare<sup>6</sup>.*

And of such, Dante himself, being the embodiment of medieval civilisation, has proved the most appropriate example.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dante, *Inf.* II, 13; *Purg.* XVI, 42. Thomas-à-Kempis, *De Imit.* II, 12, 12.

<sup>2</sup> See *Owayne Miles*. <sup>3</sup> *St Patrick's Purgatory*, 1844, chap. IV.

<sup>4</sup> *Der Taucher*. <sup>5</sup> *Ante*, vol. I, chap. VII, § 4. <sup>6</sup> *De Spiritu Guidonis*.

## CHAPTER XII

### A NOTE ON *DIVINA COMMEDIA* AND A GLANCE FORWARD

ALITERATURE of almost Shakespearean proportions has grown up round Dante, and no one surely would let himself be involved in so labyrinthine a study, if he wished ever to escape and pursue other subjects. But as the theory elaborated in the previous chapter cannot be established without a glance at the greatest of all visionaries, we must conclude with a few words on the light which he sheds on our discussion.

#### i. *Dante himself is not only an epic poet, but also an epic character.*

In the first place it must be recalled that a vision of the next life transported the poet and his readers into the world of realities. We have already explained how man's sojourn on earth was a mere preliminary, an initial and precarious stage during which, after his soul and mind had united, they found themselves attached to a body tainted with sin, and that the working of these spiritual and intellectual elements was clouded by the perversities of the flesh<sup>1</sup>. St Augustin, like Plutarch, believed that it was as natural for the mind to see the future as the past but that the soul was weighed down and distracted by the body, so that we cannot with the eyes of the mind perceive anything as it really is, any more than we descry the sun shining behind a cloud<sup>2</sup>. It must further be remembered that in the corrupted currents of this world the great issues of life and death can hardly ever appear at their true values. But in the next world all the baffling accessories of existence fall away, and woe betide the soul who has trusted to them and has not sought for the realities beneath the show. *Quis es tu, ut timeas*

<sup>1</sup> *Ante*, chap. II, § 5; chap. x, § 2, p. 202.

<sup>2</sup> *Solilog.* III.

*a mortali homine? Hodie est, et cras non comparet?*<sup>1</sup>. So it was from the point of view of futurity that Dante set himself to portray the labours and achievements of the catholic hero.

It must also be borne in mind that the poet did not confine himself to his own inventions. All true epics are the work of many brains, containing sometimes the experience and often the legends of many centuries. The hand which gives the composition final shape and fills it with the spirit of a single age, is the last of a long series. So it was with Dante's poem. All the great characters of history and legend known to the Middle Ages, who had played a real or imaginary part in the progress or regression of mankind, who could be considered to be champions of Good or of Evil, seem to appear, as if of their own accord, and to claim their place in this epic of the restoration of man. Dante probably recognised no distinctions of time or place in dealing with the adventures of the human spirit. It is the essence of an epic to blend the past with the present, and the poet might claim this license with double right, since there are no ages in eternity.

But if every epic is made up of many threads, they must all unite into one texture; the career of the protagonist. As Dante makes his progress through the three realms of eternity he does not merely play the part of a witness. In a sense he experiences all that he sees. In mind and spirit he rises to each great occasion. Though he represents himself as a contrite and humiliated seeker after salvation, or as a strayed pilgrim who cannot regain his lost path without the aid of beings wiser and more enlightened than himself, yet the Dante of the *Divina Commedia* is a hero. Even if the medieval dream of a perfect man was that of a being specially graced and privileged by God, yet that being had to prove himself worthy of divine alliance and companionship. Thus the story of how Dante visited Hell, Purgatory and Heaven is no allegory of the purely receptive and contemplative life. It is a parable of how one man renounced the world and afterwards, through a series of startling adventures, rediscovered it in the vivid unmistakeable colours of eternal truth, and then how he went on to

<sup>1</sup> *De Imit.* III, 36, 3.

discern with more than human insight what are the purest, strongest and noblest qualities in human nature, and lastly how he came into contact with what is altogether divine.

## II. *The Inferno as an epic.*

There is no need to recall the well-known episodes of Dante's stormy career; his ambition, disillusionment, and self-reproach; nor the collapse of his material fortunes; nor the hundred ways in which he was made to realise the vileness and cruelty possible in human nature. All religious teachers from Christ onwards have insisted that man must lose the world to gain his own soul or in Thomas-à-Kempis's picturesque phrase that it was necessary *nudus nudum Jesum sequi*<sup>1</sup>. Dante had undergone this preparation only too thoroughly, though without seeking refuge in a life of cloistered virtue. But it is desirable to consider a few episodes in his poem. By telling how he restored and saved his own soul, he is also telling how mankind conquered Original Sin, and as both achievements are described in the form of an adventure which proves the ultimate ennoblement of man, the poem is an epic.

At the very beginning of his ordeal, the adventurer is called upon to face and to overcome the most subtle and overwhelming of medieval adversaries, the fear of the supernatural. Most of the grotesque and fascinating daemonology which so strongly appeals to us as typically medieval, really belongs to the age of Institoris and Sprenger, rather than to that of Dante, but the most enlightened humanist of the thirteenth century must have been convinced that there were many ghostly enemies to dread. So while Hesiod, Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid and Snorri have prepared us to expect the diseases and plagues of this world, or the dragons and giants "of the prime" in Hell, Dante has to encounter evil spirits in which he can hardly have refused to believe. The mortal who set foot in Hell had in one respect placed himself within the power of these malevolent spirits. Such were the reasons why the hero of the *Divina Commedia* has to steel his heart with more than human courage, and Dante symbolises by these figures the first stage in a mortal's ascent.

<sup>1</sup> III, 37, 5.

The second stage is worthy of this beginning. As has been said, he is visiting Hell in order to understand the real misery and vileness of sin. No doubt, he might have spared his pains and gained at any rate a moralist's insight merely by studying the great classical authorities. In fact the poet has done so, and in classifying the sins punished in the *Inferno* he has made free use of Aristotle's enumeration of the moral states which are above, below and between vice and virtue<sup>1</sup>. But in order to loathe wickedness it must come into touch with one's senses. When a medieval preacher wished to strike home to the hearts of his congregation, he found or invented some story which gave his sermon the emotional touch of experience and brought it vividly before the imagination<sup>2</sup>. Dante employs the same arts. The visions which he feigns to meet his gaze are each a story which unforgettably analyses and illustrates some sin—a *spiegelnde Strafe*—so that its peculiar vileness can be felt to the very core, and many examples could be given of the crimes and vices which are seen in all their horrible reality by those who have the courage to brave Hell and the intellect to win Vergil as a guide. When Sir Orpheo<sup>3</sup> entered fairyland he first gazed on flowery meadows, green pastures and a marvellous Gothic castle studded with dazzling jewels. But soon he was appalled to find himself among corpses still distorted as when they died. Such was the older method of giving Christian significance to a pagan story. Dante goes further. He describes not the appearance but the torments of the dead. Yet these horrors do not merely appal him; the sight of them clarifies and instructs his intellect. He understands *le anime mal nate—le genti dolorose ch' hanno perduto il ben dell' intelletto—tutti quanti fur guerci della mente*<sup>4</sup>.

It is noticeable that though each of the victims of Hell illustrates the misery of some particular sin, yet we are constantly reminded of the strenuous passionate life which they have left on earth. None of them are poltroons. Except for the admirable satire on those *che visser senza infamia e senza lodo*<sup>5</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> *Ethics*, VII, 1; *Inf.* xi.

<sup>2</sup> *I.e.* *Exempla*. See *Camb. Hist. Eng. Lit.* vol. III, chap. 5; also *ante*, chap. xi, § 4, pp. 247–8.

<sup>3</sup> *Sir Orpheo*, II. 349 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Inf.* v, 7; III, 18; VII, 40.

<sup>5</sup> III, 36.

and who exist obscurely on the outskirts devoured with envy of the other states, most of the scenes in the *Inferno* are lighted with flashes of human energy and genius. Some of them retain, even in the pit of Hell, their haughty scorn and defiant self-command<sup>1</sup>. These are the examples of men so ill-starred or perverted that reason never controlled their powers, but Dante seems to have respected their kinship with human greatness. The epic instinct which recognises the hint of nobility, even in men abhorred for their violence or oppressiveness, is not likely to miss other touches of grandeur which can coexist with the gravest defects of character. One of the chief wonders of the *Inferno* is the series of monologues, so admirable for their restraint and intensity, with which the finer spirits, even in the midst of their tortures, lay bare their hearts<sup>2</sup>. In fact the figures are so real, and their vitality seems so full, that one is tempted to detect in the poet's emotion a secret sympathy or even partiality for the culprits. We may well believe that Dante at some period passed through such a phase. He may very likely have been perplexed at the unmistakeable emergence of virtue in characters guilty of one of the deadly sins; or at passages of heroism and suffering in the careers of men given over to vice or impiety. He may even once have found that good and evil are too inextricably mixed in human nature to justify the system of rewards and punishments inculcated in the theology of his age. Like Langland<sup>3</sup>, he certainly used to question the justice of excluding even the wisest and most honourable pagans from Heaven. Such heretical doubts may possibly have lurked in the *selva selvaggia e aspra e forte*<sup>4</sup>, out of which Vergil guided him, and they may have been amongst the aberrations for which he was constrained to make such ample amends to Beatrice.

If Dante ever harboured such ideas, the *Inferno* is their

<sup>1</sup> E.g. x, 36 (Farinata); xiv, 43 (Capaneo); xviii, 82 (Jason); xxiv, 121 (Vanni Fucci).

<sup>2</sup> x, 52 (Cavalcanti); xiii, 58 (Pier della Vigna); xxvi, 90 (Ulysses); xxvii, 61 (Guido da Montefeltro); xxxiii, 1 (Ugolino).

<sup>3</sup> R. W. Chambers, *Long Will, Dante and the Righteous Heathen*, Essays and Studies of the English Association, vol. ix, 1923.

<sup>4</sup> *Inf.* i, 5. For problem of "The righteous heathen" see *ante*, chap. x, § 3, and cf. *Inf.* iv, 13 ff.; *Purg.* vi, 34 ff.; *xxxii*, 55 ff.

recantation. No past actions could counterbalance the canker of sin. This was the truth which Dante professes to have won by sheer reason and intellect. If he now sometimes fails to carry his readers with him, it is because they are not medieval. They do not realise that the virtues attributed to the damned are such as could be found among the old discarded ideals of chivalry or classical folklore, whereas their crimes are such as that new age of middle-class scholars and theologians utterly abhorred. It might also be suggested that the modern man or woman is often possessed by a number of conflicting ideas, and despairs of forming a conviction on this or that subject. Hence that sympathy with spiritual uncertainty, that cult of doubtfulness which characterises so much modern poetry. No such sentimentality is to be found in Dante. He is, indeed, on several occasions found pitying the victims of divine Justice, but even if his heart sometimes plays truant, he does not allow his mind to follow it. His sureness of touch comes largely from this singleness of thought. Every character mounts the stage to contribute his part to the one great idea which the mortal is to carry back with him. But that is no reason why these figures should not be intensely human. Possibly the poet had not forgotten that souls which have lost every spark of heavenly light must be for ever bent earthwards, and therefore represented them as so anxious for their repute in the old life and so full of memories<sup>1</sup>.

### III. *The Purgatorio and Paradiso as an epic.*

In Hell the souls were tortured and transformed by their wickedness because it had grown into their nature. In Purgatory Dante finds men and women whose passions were in many cases just as ill-controlled, and whose actions were sometimes just as godlessly misdirected, but who had all succeeded in preserving a certain sense of righteousness. He is in a country of sunshine, starlight and the sparkle of the sea. The dwellers of this peaceful mountain, haunted by soft breezes, solemn strains of music and the presence of angels,

<sup>1</sup> vi, 89; xiii, 76; xv, 119; xvi, 82; xxviii, 106; xxxi, 125.

are like their abode. Though many of them have played a great part in their former life they no longer retain their old passions and enthusiasms. Most of them have neither head nor heart for anything but the one sin which they have to purge. The modern reader is, perhaps, inclined to feel that these warriors, statesmen, kings and artists have sacrificed too much. They have lost the whole world to gain their own souls. Their vital energy, their enthusiasms, their interests, their ideals—in fact their humanity—are all oppressed by monasticism. We are apt to forget that the later Middle Ages idealised a heroism peculiar to that time: the will to overcome Original Sin; that the man who could withstand that menace was rightly regarded as the noblest type of warrior, one who had, in the language of canonisation, proved himself to be *in heroico gradu virtutis*. Thus a medieval poet who turned his thoughts to repentance and expiation might well derive from the theme a sense of spaciousness and a grandeur which we find difficult to appreciate.

So it was with Dante. In the *Purgatorio* he has created a second epic, but it is an epic of will-power and of self-purification. Man contains his own salvation in himself; if he has gone astray, *in voi è la cagione*<sup>1</sup>. But in order to conquer sin, the penitent must live a lonely life. He must give himself up to contemplation and commune with God and with his own soul. He must call philosophy and theology to his help, and begin his self-conquest by understanding his own nature and destiny. Even after he has cultivated a horror of wickedness, his problem is still largely one for the intellect. Thus, while allegorising this second stage in the redemption of man, Dante is largely confined to the handling of speculative and theoretical matters. Yet such is his sympathy and imagination that he succeeds in giving to these debates the atmosphere of an adventure. Every piece of theology and of moral teaching comes to his pilgrims as a surprise or an experience. Famous characters from the whole of past literature and history are adduced to illustrate church doctrines, and examples are not merely quoted or propounded, but are sometimes uttered by mysterious

<sup>1</sup> xvi, 79 ff. See also G. Gentile, *Dante e Manzoni*.

voices in the air, or carved on marble, or figured in visions<sup>1</sup>. But if the moral will is to be restored and healed, the soul will sometimes require teaching which is too abstract to be symbolised. These passages of sheer philosophy are developed in conversation, and Statius is brought on to the scene to give variety and character to the disquisitions. In fact illumination is so necessary to the moral progress of man, that no journey may be made through Purgatory except by day<sup>2</sup>, and the explorers pass the nights in discussing theology or in seeing visions. Yet there is, as it were, a thread of action, of profound significance for the human race, which runs right through this part of the poem, and draws all speculations and allegories along with it to a well-defined end: the problem of self-discipline. Just as in Hell the punishments of the damned were illustrations of the vileness of sin, so here in Purgatory each penance is a process of self-purification.

Besides, a careful study of the text will reveal a strain of sober and unquenchable optimism which runs through the learned disquisitions. It seems impossible not to feel a certain grave pride in the phases and incidents of man's upward struggle; in the thought that even sinners may, at the last moment of death, receive just enough light to be filled with an endless desire to see God<sup>3</sup>; or that love is so universal and potent an influence that those filled with it on earth can shorten the penances of Purgatory by their prayers<sup>4</sup>; or that, besides our senses and our thoughts, we possess another faculty so refined that after a night's freedom from the brain in sleep it can look into the future<sup>5</sup>. In fact the belief in the divinity of the soul is one of the chief inspirations of the *Purgatorio*. There are few more cheering passages in all literature than that in which Marco Lombardi explains that God himself creates the human mind and ordains that it should be superior to all astrological influences, and should be subject only to the

<sup>1</sup> x, 52 (David singing before the ark); 73 (Trajan and the widow); xiii, 31 (Orestes), 36 (Amata); xv, 85 (Jesus in the Temple), 106 (St Stephen), 94 (Peisistratos); xvii, 25 (Haman); xx, 103 (Pygmalion) 106 (Midas), 112 (Sapphira); xxiv, 121 (Centaurs); xxv, 130 (Diana).

<sup>2</sup> vii, 52; xvii, 63.

<sup>3</sup> v, 51.

<sup>4</sup> vi, 37.

<sup>5</sup> ix, 13. See also *Inf.* xxvi, 7.

creator<sup>1</sup>. Or again the scholastic distinction that though the *volontà condizionata* may lure the soul to sin on earth and may for a time oppose the desire for purification in Purgatory, yet all those who are not spiritually dead are possessed by a *volontà assoluta* which is always striving to regain God<sup>2</sup>.

Despite all these impulses and ideas, there is still something lacking. The poet who has conceived in Hell an utter abhorrence of sin, and has learnt in Purgatory by his own actions and will power and by the wisdom of churchmen and philosophers to eliminate his vicious tendencies, is as yet nothing more than a chamber "swept and garnished." But if he is to soar to Paradise, and to behold the vision of God, he must be filled with a passion for holiness. He needs to have before his eyes some radiant ideal which will awake the super-intellectual faculties; something so pure and ethereal that it will suggest the consummation of Heaven, and will fill him with yearning for the perfection of God; something that will cause his emotional nature to catch heat and grow to a full understanding of what is divine. It is only by such spiritual enlargement that this man will gain perception, first to confess how gross and unworthy all purely human pursuits are, and secondly to feel that the truths of religion can transcend the intellect and ravish the soul.

Dante's symbolisation of this stage of man's regeneration is generally considered to be the most felicitous part of the *Commedia*. It will be remembered that one of the problems of progress in the Middle Ages was to raise the estimation of women in the eyes of the world, and we have seen<sup>3</sup> how knights (at any rate in the courtly romances) would take some lady (whom perhaps they had hardly seen) to typify the honour, happiness and dream of refinement which they sought—to be, as it were, an intermediary between them and what they had learnt to cherish as their ideals. Dante in his own youth had worshipped a woman with all the ritual of secrecy and poetic adulation recognised by the fashion

<sup>1</sup> xvi, 67. Of course the doctrine is founded on Thomas Aquinas.

<sup>2</sup> *Purg.* xxi, 61; cf. *Para.* iv, 100. Thomas Aquinas, iii, Suppl. Append. qu. II, art. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ante*, chap. x, § 4.

of his day. It is said that he afterwards repented of having written *Vita Nuova*. Nevertheless when he came to describe his pilgrimage through eternity, he did not abandon his youthful ideal, but he broadened it and ennobled it to suit his mighty argument. Beatrice is still the inspirer of love, but no longer of any sexual passion. Having died and risen to an honoured place in Heaven, she is filled with the serenity and perfect intelligence of those realms. The secrets of Paradise are revealed to her; she understands the destiny of men, and the sources of divine power, and their influence among both angels and men. Above all, having come into contact with God she is filled with measureless love for all that is god-like. Such is the power which she exercises over Dante. She is illumination:

*che lume fia tra il Vero e l'Intelletto*<sup>1</sup>.

She fills him with that spiritual love and divine enthusiasm without which no mortal can acquire insight into the mysteries of eternity. She has generally been taken to represent theology, but that term has lost so many of its older associations that it is better to describe her as the spirit of secret understanding and worship without which theology is nothing but a science.

The Heaven to which Beatrice and Dante now rise is a realm in which the thirst for all theological knowledge is quenched and where the absolute truth can be learnt. In fact it is the peculiar pleasure and function of the Blest to satisfy this craving<sup>2</sup>. The whole atmosphere seems to be charged with a certain intellectuality. Each of the saints occupies one of the nine planets or spheres according to the value of his services on earth, yet all equally have their eyes fixed on God, and God is a mirror in which each one reflects his thoughts even before he himself conceives them<sup>3</sup>. Outside Heaven, Vergil is the only spirit gifted with intuition<sup>4</sup>, but here, as Sir Thomas Browne was afterwards to hold<sup>5</sup>, all angels can thus in a flash think with the same mind. The poet takes part in this feast of thought and inspiration. As he passes from one sphere to the other, each advance is marked by the initiation into doctrines which become progressively more profound. He

<sup>1</sup> *Purg.* vi, 45.

<sup>2</sup> *Para.* x, 88.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* xv, 61.

<sup>4</sup> *Purg.* xv, 127.

<sup>5</sup> *Rel. Med.* i, 33-4.

mounts as it were by the knowledge of mystery after mystery. This poem, like all genuine epics, has its great moments. One of its greatest occurs when Dante, still possessed by the unspeakable longing which no trials or experiences can lessen, is suddenly caught up into the eighth sphere. While flying upward, he is bidden to look backward, and beholds the earth and the lower heavens at his feet and he becomes a superman in the range of his vision and the sublimity of his consciousness<sup>1</sup>. Nor must we suppose that the *Paradiso* lacks the suggestion of achievement. The initiate becomes greater with each experience, his spiritual vision grows in range and penetration, till at the consummation he can endure to gaze on the divine Essence and can comprehend something of the nature of God. Thanks to the visions which have been accorded to him, he can merge his own petty questionings into what St Augustin called a *magna beatitudo*<sup>2</sup>. That is to say, he is enabled in some measure to imagine the profundity of the divine Mind; to let himself be absorbed by its pervasiveness and inscrutability; to experience supreme joy in this absorption<sup>3</sup>.

The whole conception is foreign to twentieth-century ideals, so one does not easily realise how magnificently our poet closes an epoch. However great Dante's personal misfortunes may have been, he enjoyed one supreme compensation. He came at a time when the labours and aspirations of over a thousand years had reached a climax; when generation after generation had pursued and refined a great idea till it exactly corresponded to the highest needs of that civilisation; when the quintessential thought had been embodied in doctrines and figures such as a single individual could absorb into his intellectual and emotional being. We see in the person of Dante how medieval civilisation again reached the epic ideal of human sufficiency through divine Power—the conquest of fear and the satisfaction of man's highest impulses.

It was for the last time. In the fourteenth century society was already beginning to disintegrate, and in any case the rising generations would have had to abandon their former

<sup>1</sup> xxii, 124-54.

<sup>2</sup> iii, 70; xx, 138.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Canto xxviii.

conquests and explore new realms of sentiment and imagination. Such conditions are regularly recurrent in the progress of civilisation, and serve to keep alive the human spirit. So in itself the phenomenon has no special significance. But it is immensely important to notice that, after Dante, human beings seem gradually to have abandoned the ideal of human perfectibility which had inspired mankind since the age of Homer. There may be exceptions in the case of individuals or cults, but in the main humanists and poets now began to look for serenity through resignation and insight. They reconciled themselves to their defects by understanding them. From the mid-fifteenth century onward, trials of a new kind were awaiting the human race. Man was not required to pass again through an ordeal like the Dark Ages, but as he plodded through the picturesque ruins of decayed feudalism towards the freer, more open landscapes of the Renaissance, he picked up and stored in a wallet on his back the disillusionments, prejudices and fragments of discarded civilisation which strewed his path. He found this burden marvellously cumbersome as he clambered among the rocks, streams and hills of the later more spacious centuries. (The sixteenth century has often been described as the hour of dawn, a time of morning glow and dewy meadows. Perhaps it might have been, but the toiling pilgrims were too loath to lay down the sack which each carried. They preferred to overlook and revalue its contents and to increase more often than lessen the bulk. Meanwhile they learnt to pick their way more and more carefully through the ever-increasing difficulties of their route. Such seems to have been the spirit of the Renaissance as expressed in drama, narrative, controversy, mysticism and self-description. When compared with the preceding ages of epic aspiration, the succeeding epoch appears in a fresh and for the twentieth century a most interesting light. The present writer hopes one day to discuss its significance in a sequel to this volume which he now lays aside with a sense of infinite relief.



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